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The editors are pleased to present Ravi Vasudevan's article, which is the joint winner of the Screen Award for the best article or research paper submitted to the journal in 1994.

Addressing the spectator of a 'third world' national cinema: the Bombay 'social' film of the 1940s and 1950s

RAVI S. VASUDEVAN

Recent discussions of cinema and national identity in the 'third world' context have tended, by and large, to cluster around the concept of a 'third cinema'. Here the focus has been on recovering or reinventing 'national' aesthetic and narrative traditions against the homogenizing impulses of Hollywood in its domination over markets and normative standards. One of the hallmarks of third cinema theory has been its firmly unchauvinist approach to the 'national'. In its references to wider international aesthetic practices, and especially to modernist drives, third cinema asserts but problematizes the boundaries between nation and other. In the process, it also explores the ways in which the suppressed internal others of the nation, whether of class, sub- or counter-nationality, ethnic group or gender, can find a voice.¹

A substantial lacuna in this project has been any sustained understanding of the domestic commercial cinema in the 'third world'. This is important because in countries such as India the commercial film has, since the dawn of the 'talkies', successfully marginalized Hollywood's position in the domestic market. This is not to claim that it has functioned within an entirely self-referential autarchy. The Bombay cinema stylistically integrated aspects of the world 'standard', and has also been influential in certain foreign markets. But it constitutes something like a 'nation space' against the dominant norms of Hollywood, and so ironically fulfils aspects of the role which the avant-garde third cinema proclaims as its own. Clearly, the difference in language cannot be the major explanation for this autonomy, for

1 For a representative selection of articles, see Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

other national cinemas have succumbed to the rule of the Hollywood film. Instead, it is in the peculiarities of the Indian commercial film as an entertainment form that we may find the explanation for its ascendancy over the home market.

The formation of a national market for the Bombay cinema was a multi-layered phenomenon. Bombay became ascendent in the home market only in the 1950s. Earlier, Pune in Maharashtra and Calcutta in Bengal were important centres of film production, catering to the Marathi and Bengali speaking 'regional' audience as well as to the Hindi audience which is the largest linguistic market in the country. While these regional markets continued to exist, Bombay became the main focus of national film production. This ascendancy was curtailed by the emergence of important industries in Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, producing films in Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam. From the 1980s, these centres produced as many, and often more, films than Bombay.² There has been a certain equivalence in the narrative form of these cinemas, but each region contributed its distinctive features to the commercial film. In the Tamil and Telugu cases the cinema also has a strong link with the politics of regional and ethnic identity.

The achievement of the commercial cinema has had ambivalent implications for the social and political constitution of its spectator. All of these cinemas are involved in constructing a certain abstraction of national identity; by national identity I mean here not only the pan-Indian one, but also regional constructions of national identity. This process of abstraction suppresses other identities, either through stereotyping or through absence. The Bombay cinema has a special role here, because it positions other national/ethnic/religious and social identities (it has largely avoided representing the crucial question of caste) in stereotypical ways under an overarching north Indian, majoritarian Hindu identity. The stereotypes of the 'southerner' (or 'Madrasi', a term which dismissively collapses the entire southern region), the Bengali, the Parsi, the Muslim, the Sikh and the Christian occupy the subordinate positions in this universe. Bombay crystallized as the key centre for the production of national fictions just at the moment that the new state came into existence, so its construction of the national narrative carries a particular force.³

Indian commercial cinema has exerted an international presence in countries of Indian immigration as in East Africa, Mauritius, the Middle East and South East Asia, but also in a significant swathe of Northern Africa.⁴ It has also been popular in the countries of the former Soviet Union and China. Such a sphere of influence makes one think of a certain arc of narrative form separate from, if overlapping at points with, the larger hegemony exercised by Hollywood. From the description of the cultural 'peculiarities' of the Bombay cinema which follows, one could speculate whether its narrative form has a special resonance in 'transitional' societies. The diegetic world of this cinema

- 2 For the standard account, see E. Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); also Manjunath Pendakur, 'India', in John A. Lent (ed.), *The Asian Film Industry* (London: Christopher Helm, 1990), p. 231. For reflections on the subordinating implications of Bombay's national cinema, see my 'Dislocations: the cinematic imagining of a new society in 1950s India', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 16 (1994).
- 3 M. B. Billimoria, 'Foreign markets for Indian films', *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56 (Bombay: Film Federation of India, 1956), pp. 53-4. A substantial deposit of Indian films distributed by Wapar France, an agency which catered to North African markets, are in the French film archives at Bois d'Arcy. For the importance of Indian film imports to Indonesia and Burma, see Lent, *The Asian Film Industry*, pp. 202, 223; and for patterns of Indian film exports at the end of the 1980s, see Pendakur, 'India', p. 240. The Hindi film's contribution to the general sense of subordination of local products in North Africa and the Middle East is indicated in the observation that 'none of these cinemas [from Morocco to Kuwait] is doing well ... markets are flooded with Rambos, Karate films, Hindu [sic.] musicals and Egyptian films'. Lisbeth Malkmus, 'The "new Egyptian cinema"', *Cineaste*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1988), p. 30.

5 The term comes from Tom Gunning, 'The cinema of attraction: early film, its spectator and the avant-garde', *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, nos. 3–4 (1986). There is a more elaborate discussion of this term in relation to the Bombay cinema later in this paper. For reflections on other 'attraction' based cinemas see Laleen Jayamanne, 'Sri Lankan family melodrama: a cinema of primitive attractions', *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1992), pp. 145–53; and Gerard Fouquet, 'Of genres and savours in Thai film', *Cinemaya*, no. 6 (1989–90), pp. 4–9.

6 Nick Browne, 'The spectator of American symbolic forms: re-reading John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*', *Film Reader*, part 5 (1979), pp. 180–88.

is primarily governed by the logic of kinship relations, and its plot driven by family conflict. The system of dramaturgy is a melodramatic one, displaying the characteristic ensemble of manichaeism, bipolarity, the privileging of the moral over the psychological, and the deployment of coincidence. And the relationship between narrative, performance sequence and action spectacle is loosely structured in the fashion of a cinema of attractions.⁵ In addition to these features, the system of narration incorporates Hollywood codes of continuity editing in a fitful, unsystematic fashion, relies heavily on visual forms such as the tableau and inducts stable cultural codes of looking of a more archaic sort. Aspects of this picture echo the form of early Euro-American cinema, indicating that what appeared as a fairly abbreviated moment in the history of western cinema has defined the long-term character of this influential cinema of 'another world'. What is required here is a comparative account of narrative forms in 'transitional' societies which might set out a different story of the cinema than the dominant Euro-American one.

In this paper I want to isolate certain aspects of this way of framing the Bombay cinema, focusing in particular on how the spectator of the 'national film' is addressed. I conceive of this as 'an analysis, even if rudimentary, of the position of the spectator within his/her cultural context, within certain large representational and belief systems'.⁶ I am using examples from the 1940s and 1950s Hindi social film – the genre used to address the problems of modern life – to explain how the cinema invited the spectator to assume an identity defined along the axis of gender, class and nationhood. I want to do this primarily by identifying the way in which filmic visual culture and narrative form impinge on and shape the subjectivity of the spectator. For a large part of this paper, I will be concerned with the textual constitution of the spectator, but in the final section I will outline the dimensions of a historically significant spectatorial position that developed in the 1940s. I will focus on the way in which prevailing anxieties about the definition of a national identity at the time of the country's independence were reflected in offscreen discourses about actors and directors and how they influenced filmic reception. The popular cinema was involved in mapping a symbolic space which envisaged the national formation as being grounded in certain hierarchies. Here, I lay particular emphasis on the relations between the majority Hindu group and the minority Muslim as it was relayed through film narratives and offscreen discourses.

A dominant paradigm

Before turning to visual and narrative analysis, I want briefly to summarize some of the conventional viewpoints about the commercial film in India and the nature of its spectator. The dominant view is that

of a tradition of film criticism associated with Satyajit Ray and the Calcutta Film Society in the 1950s. This school of criticism, which has proved influential in subsequent mainstream film criticism, assailed the popular cinema for its derivativeness from the sensational aspects of the US cinema, the melodramatic externality and stereotyping of its characters, and especially for its failure to focus on the psychology of human interaction. In these accounts, the spectator of the popular film emerges as an immature, indeed infantile, figure, one bereft of the rationalist imperatives required for the Nehru era's project of national construction.⁷

Recent analyses of the popular cinemas in the 'non-western' world suggest to me that the melodramatic mode has, with various indigenous modifications, been a characteristic form of narrative and dramaturgy in societies undergoing the transition to modernity.⁸ 'National' criticisms of this prevalent mode have taken the particular form that I have just specified, and have had both developmentalist and democratic components. The implication was that, insofar as the melodramatic mode was grounded in an anti-individualist ethos, it would undercut the rational, critical outlook required for the development of a just, dynamic and independent nation.⁹

In the Indian case, this premise of modern film criticism has been taken in rather different directions. The critic Chidananda Das Gupta emerges from the dominant tradition, being one of the founder members of the Calcutta Film Society. His recent book, *The Painted Face*,¹⁰ argues that the commercial film catered to a spectator who had not severed his ties from the countryside and so had a traditional or pre-modern relationship to the image, one which incapacitated him or her from distinguishing between image and reality.¹¹ Das Gupta also argues that the pre-rationalist spectator was responsive to Bombay cinema's focus on family travails and identity, a focus which displaces attention from the larger social domain. He describes the spectator caught up in the psychic trauma brought about by threatened loss of the mother and the struggle for adult identity as adolescent and self-absorbed or 'totalist'.¹² We have echoes here of the realist criticism of the 1950s in its reference to the spectator of the commercial film as infantile. There is a class component to the psychological paradigm, in which the uprooted, lumpen and working class are regarded as the main audience for the Bombay film. Such a conception of the spectator ultimately has political implications. Das Gupta sees this social and psychic configuration reflecting the gullible mentality that enabled the rise to power of the actor-politicians of the south, M. G. Ramachandran and N. T. Rama Rao.¹³ The naive spectator actually believed his screen idols to be capable of the prowess they displayed onscreen. In Das Gupta's view, the rational outlook required for the development of a modern nation state is still lacking, and the popular cinema provides us with an index of the cognitive impairment of the majority of the Indian people.

7 For an exploration of this influential critical tradition, see my 'Shifting codes, dissolving identities: the Hindi social film of the 1950s as popular culture', *Journal of Art and Ideas*, nos. 23-4 (1993), pp. 51-85.

8 See the collection of essays in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

9 For example, Mitsushiro Yoshimoto's account of the postwar domestic criticism of Japanese cinema, 'Melodrama, post-modernism and Japanese cinema' in Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, pp. 101-26, especially pp. 110-11. Thus where late nineteenth-century Europe's discourses about melodrama helped institute a hegemonic class culture, in the context of developing societies, the 'failures' of melodrama are regarded within the imperatives of establishing a modern national configuration. For the class implications of the European context, see Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), Introduction.

10 Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1991).

11 Das Gupta, 'Seeing is believing', in *The Painted Face*, pp. 35-44.

12 Das Gupta, 'City and village' and 'The Oedipal hero', in *The Painted Face*, pp. 45-58, 70-106.

13 Das Gupta, 'The painted face of Indian politics', in *The Painted Face*, pp. 199-247.

14 All references are to Ashish Nandy, 'The intelligent film critic's guide to the Indian cinema', *Deep Focus*, vol. 1, nos 1-3 (1987-8); reprinted in Nandy, *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

This psychological and social characterization of the premodern spectator is pervasive, even if it is not used to the same ends as Das Gupta's. The social psychologist Ashish Nandy, while working outside (and, indeed, against) the realist tradition, shares some of its assumptions about the psychological address of the commercial film.¹⁴ Nandy argues that the personality as expressed in Indian culture differed from that conceived by modern western culture. There are two features in his conception of the psychical difference between pre-modern and modern forms in film narratives. For him, the dominant spectator of the popular cinema, caught in 'traditional' arenas of life and work, is quite remote from the outlook of the modern middle class; as such, this spectator is attracted to a narrative which ritually neutralizes the discomfiting features of social change, those modern thought patterns and practices which have to be adopted for reasons of survival. Regressing into a submissive familial frame of reference provides one narrative route for the traumatized spectator. But there is a second, contestatory psychic trajectory. Nandy suggests that Indian culture was defined by androgynous elements which provided the most fertile form of resisting colonial, and more broadly modern, paradigms of progress. He embraces the cultural indices of a subjectivity which is not governed by the rationalist psychology and reality orientation of that contested other. In this sense he valorizes that which Das Gupta sees as a drawback.

So a psychical matrix for understanding the address of the commercial Bombay film to its spectator, echoing in some respects the realist criticism of the 1950s, has been extended into the more explicitly psychoanalytical interpretations of spectatorial dispositions and cognitive capacities. Ironically, these premises are shared both by those critical of the commercial film and its spectator for their lack of reality orientation, and those who valorize Indian culture's resistance to modern forms of consciousness. These arguments in turn support different visions of how the relationship between psychology, class and society/nation can give rise to different dynamics of social transformation.

The popular cinema is much more complicated than these criticisms allow. Greater attention has to be paid to the relationship between family and society, between the private and the public, and especially the relations of power within which this subjectivity is produced. For instance, a marked feature of these formulations is the absence of any understanding of patriarchy, of the gendered authority which I will argue is central to understanding the sociopolitical vision of the popular film. Film studies in India will have to engage with the terms of identity offered by the cinema, its fantasy scenarios and its norms of authority and responsibility instead of insisting that an 'adult' identity is non-negotiable or, in certain countercultural readings, undesirable. Above all, it will have to look at these questions as ones of cinematic narration.

An Indian melodrama

On the issue of personality construction and its implications for social transformation, a useful point of departure is the elaborate Euro-American theoretical mapping of melodramatic modes of theatre and fiction. It is worth recalling that British theatre exercised considerable influence on the development of the nineteenth-century Indian urban theatre.¹⁵ In Peter Brooks's work,¹⁶ melodrama emerged in the nineteenth century as a form which spoke of a post-sacred universe in which the certainties of traditional meaning and hierarchical authority had been displaced. The melodramatic narrative constantly makes an effort to recover this lost security, but meaning comes to be increasingly founded in the personality. Characters take on essential, psychic resonances corresponding to family identities and work out forbidden conflicts and desires. The family is then positioned as the new locus of meaning. The spectator is addressed through the most basic registers of experience, with the narratives focusing on primal triggers of desire and anxiety. In the process, the social dimension is not displaced, but collapses into the familial and, indeed, the family itself becomes a microcosm of the social level. Melodramatic narratives therefore tend to represent the most significant characters of social life as key familial figures, father, mother and child. It would be a mistake then to categorize these narratives as bounded by the psychic universe of the inward, family-fixated adolescent. That would be to reduce the universe constructed by film narratives to their foundational address.

However, a melodramatic narrative and dramaturgy is also employed in Indian film genres such as the mythological and devotional, not only in post-sacred genres such as the social. To further confound the secular dimensions of melodrama, even in the Bombay 'social', the genre of the modern day, women often employ a traditional Hindu idiom deifying the husband. What implications does this have for melodrama as a so-called post-sacred form?

Narrative structures and strategies are rather more complicated than these religious idioms would suggest. The sociologist Veena Das, in her article on the popular mythological film *Jai Santoshi Ma/Hail Santoshi Ma* (Vijay Sharma, 1975),¹⁷ and the art critic Geeta Kapur, in her analysis of the 'devotional', *Sant Tukaram* (Fatehlal and Damle, 1936),¹⁸ show that the invocation of the sacred is continuous with the reference to non-sacred space, that of the family drama and everyday activity. And Anuradha Kapur's account of the urban Indian Parsi theatre suggests that the discourse of the sacred was subordinated to an emerging discourse of the real through the adoption of realist representational strategies. In her analysis, the representation of the godly through the frontal mode of representation and direct address characteristic of ritual forms is complicated by the integration of these modes into the lateral movement of characters and by features of

¹⁵ See R. K. Yagnik, *The Indian Theatre: Its Origins and Later Development under European Influence, with Special Reference to Western India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1933), pp. 92–117, for accounts of the influence of British melodrama on Indian urban theatre.

¹⁶ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (1976) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Veena Das, 'The mythological film and its framework of meaning: an analysis of *Jai Santoshi Ma*', *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1981), pp. 43–56.

¹⁸ Geeta Kapur, 'Mythic material in Indian cinema', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, nos. 14–15 (1987), pp. 79–107.

19 Anuradha Kapur, 'The representation of gods and heroes: parsi mythological drama of the early twentieth century', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, nos. 23-4 (1993), pp. 85-107.

20 See my '“You cannot live in society and ignore it”: nationhood and female modernity in *Andaz* (Mehboob Khan, 1949)', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (forthcoming).

21 Kumkum Sangari has noted the following effects of the female devotional voice: 'The orthodox triadic relation between wife, husband and god is broken. The wife no longer gets her salvation through her 'godlike' husband . . . *Bhakti* offers direct salvation. The intermediary position now belongs not to the human husband or the Brahmin priest but to the female devotional voice. This voice, obsessed with the relationships between men and women, continues to negotiate the triadic relationship – it simultaneously transgresses and reformulates patriarchal ideologies.' Sangari, 'Mirabai and the spiritual economy of *Bhakti*', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 28 (1990).

22 All references are to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 'The Hindi film', in *Indian Talkie*, p. 81.

continuity narrative. The face of the god is in turn stripped of the ornamental features highlighted in ritual drama, and his human incarnation underlined.¹⁹

As far as the female devotional idiom in socials is concerned, it can paper over the powerful chasms which films open up within the ideology of masculine authority and female submission.²⁰ The case of the female devotee especially suggests the ambiguities which may lie beneath the invocation of male sacred authority. Feminist critics have noted that it is possible to interpret the female devotional tradition as primarily emphasizing female desire, a strategy which both circumvents patriarchy and reformulates it.²¹

In all these cases, therefore, a complication of the sacred or an outward movement into the secular form is observable. We could say that a melodramatic tendency of failed or uncertain resacralization is also at work here. An Indian melodrama, both as a phenomenon having a direct genealogy with its western counterparts, as well as a larger cultural enterprise concerning the formation of new subjectivities, therefore has a definite existence and historical function. The concept of melodrama, straddling various types of representation and subjectivity, in which sacred and secular, the mythical and the real coexist, will help us get away from a definition of these terms as mutually exclusive. It is the *relay* between the familial, the social and the sacred in the Indian cinema's constitution of its diegetic world which complicates any straightforward rendering of the psyche of the Indian spectator.

Further specifications and distinctions about the spectator need to be made in terms of generic address. While D. G. Phalke inaugurated the popular cinema with the mythological genre, new genres very quickly emerged. These included the costume film, or the 'historical', the spectacular stunt or action-dominated film, the devotional film about the relationship between deity and devotee and, finally, the social film. Our knowledge about the terms in which the industry addressed spectators through genre, and the way spectators received genres, are as yet rudimentary. But a 1950s essay by an industry observer noted that stunt, mythological and costume films would attract a working-class audience.²² The film industry used two hypotheses to evaluate their audience. Firstly, that the plebeian spectators would delight in spectacle and visceral impact, uncluttered by ideas and social content. Secondly, that such an audience was also susceptible to a religious and moral rhetoric, indicated by their enjoyment of the mythological film. In the industry's view, therefore, the lower-class audience was motivated by visceral or motor-oriented pleasures and moral imperatives. Their susceptibility to the veracity of the image was not an issue in this discussion on attracting an audience.

On the other hand, the film industry understood the devotional and social films, with their emphasis on social criticism, to be the favoured genres of the middle class. However, by the 1950s, the industry

reformulated its understanding of genre and audience appeal. After the collapse of the major studios – Bombay Talkies, Prabhat, New Theatres – the new, speculative climate of the industry encouraged an eye for the quick profit and therefore the drive for a larger audience. This encouraged the induction of the sensational attractions of action, spectacle and dance into the social film, a process explained as a lure for the mass audience.

Industry observers clearly believed the changes in the social film to be quite superficial, the genre label being used to legitimize a cobbling together of sensational attractions. And, indeed, there is something inflationary about a large number of films released in the period 1949–51 being called ‘socials’. The label of the social film perhaps gave a certain legitimacy to the cinematic entertainment put together in a slapdash way. However, I will argue that these films did offer a redefinition of social identity for the spectator; the mass audiences earlier conceived of as being attracted only by sensation and themes of moral affirmation were now being solicited by an omnibus form which also included a rationalist discourse as part of its ‘attractions’.²³

Many of the formulations of the dominant paradigm refer to the cinema after the 1950s. Writers such as Das Gupta and Nandy believe that the 1950s was a transitional period between the popular culture and mixed social audience of the 1930s and 1940s and the mass audience emerging from the 1960s. However, I would suggest that the cinema of the 1950s already prefigures some of the dominant methods of the subsequent period, especially in its deployment of a rhetoric of traditional morality and identity to bind its imagining of social transformation. Perhaps it is the focus of these writers on the overt rhetoric of popular narratives that has obscured a certain dynamic in the constitution of the subject which displays dispositions other than the straightforwardly ‘traditional’.

Visual codes of narration (I): iconicity, frontality and the tableau frame

Let me now turn to the issue of visual address. For the purposes of identifying the processes of cinematic narration, we have to turn to the Indian cinema’s initial formation: a phase, from 1913, in which it not only absorbed religious and mythological narratives, but also certain modes of address. An aesthetics of frontality and iconicity has been noted for Indian films in certain phases and genres by Ashish Rajadhyaksha²⁴ and Geeta Kapur.²⁵ This aesthetic arises from mass visual culture, in instances ranging from the relationship between deity and devotee, to the enactment of religious tableaux and their representation in popular artworks such as calendars and posters. When I refer to the iconic mode, I use the term not in its precise semiotic sense, to identify a relation of resemblance, but as a category derived from Indian art-historical writing that has been employed to

²³ The reasons for the restructuring of the ‘social’ film are complex. Artists associated with the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), which had ties with the Communist Party of India, had started working in the film industry from the 1940s. Amongst these were the actor Balraj Sahni, the director Bimal Roy and the scriptwriter K. A. Abbas. The latter was involved in *Awara/The Vagabond* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), a film representative of the new drive to combine a social reform perspective with ornate spectacle. However, the years after independence were characterized by a broader ideological investment in discourses of social justice associated with the image of the new state and the ideology of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

²⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, ‘The Phalke era: conflict of traditional form and modern technology’, *Journal of Art and Ideas*, nos 14–15 (1987), pp. 47–78.

²⁵ Kapur, ‘Mythic material in Indian cinema’.

26 Ibid., p. 82.

27 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 62.

28 Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in Stephen Heath (ed. and trans.), *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1982), p. 70.

29 Ibid.

30 See a panel from the eighteenth-century Hindu text analysed by Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: the Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), for an example of this tradition.

identify a meaningful condensation of image. The term has been used to situate the articulation of the mythic within painting, theatre and cinema, and could be conceived of as cultural work which seeks to bind a multi-layered dynamic into a unitary image. In Geeta Kapur's definition, the iconic is 'an image into which symbolic meanings converge and in which moreover they achieve stasis'.²⁶

Frontal planes in cinematic composition are used to relay this work of condensation and also to group characters and objects in the space of the tableau, a visual figure which, in the Indian context, can be traced to Indian urban theatre's interactions with British melodrama in the nineteenth century. In Peter Brooks's formulation, the tableau in melodrama gives the 'spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs'.²⁷ And Barthes has noted that it is

a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view . . . [it] is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social) but is also says it knows how this must be done.²⁸

In Barthes's argument, the tableau has a temporal dimension to it, a 'pregnant moment' caught between past and future.²⁹ To my mind, these observations suggest both the highly controlled work involved in the construction of the tableau and also its inbuilt possibilities of dynamization. Its constitution of a frozen dynamic implicitly suggests the possibilities of change. This means that deployment of the tableau frame does not invariably mean indifference to the problem of offscreen space. Dissections of the tableau, cut-ins to closer views on the scene, the use of looks offscreen and character movements in and out of frame serve to complicate the tableau, fulfilling the promise of its reorganization.

I will illustrate the dynamic employment of the frontal, iconic mode, and of tableau framing in a sequence from Mehboob Khan's saga of peasant life, *Mother India* (1957). This segment presents, and then upsets, a pair of relatively stable iconic instances. The mother-in-law, Sundar Chachi, is centred through a number of tableau shots taken from different angles to highlight her authority in the village just after she has staged a spectacular wedding for her son. This representation of Sundar Chachi takes place in the courtyard of her house. The other instance is of the newly-wedded daughter-in-law Radha, shown inside the house, as she submissively massages her husband's feet, a classic image of the devout Hindu wife.³⁰ The two instances are destabilized because of the information that the wedding has forced Sundar Chachi to mortgage the family land. The information diminishes her standing, causing her to leave the gathering and enter her house. Simultaneously, it also undermines Radha's

iconic placement as submissive, devout wife. As she overhears the information, the camera tracks in to closeup, eliminating the husband from our view; she looks up and away, offscreen left, presumably towards the source of the information. As the larger space of the scene, the actual relationship between the inside and the outside, remains unspecified, the relationship is suggested by her look offscreen left. The likelihood of this positioning is further strengthened when Sundar Chachi enters the house and, looking in the direction of offscreen right, confesses that she has indeed mortgaged her land. The final shot, a repetition of Radha's look offscreen left, binds the two characters through an eyeline match. The women are narrativized out of their static, iconic position through narrative processes of knowledge circulation and character movement, and by the deployment of Hollywood codes of offscreen sound and eyeline match.

This deployment of tableau and icon is regularly observable in the popular cinema, even if their dispersal and reorganization is not always rendered by such a systematic deployment of the codes of continuity editing. In another, fairly systematic instance, from *Andaz/Style* (Mehboob Khan, 1949) I have suggested that the particular combination of character-centred continuity narration with the tableau plays off individual and socially coded orientations to the narrative event. The continuity codes highlight individual movement and awareness, and the tableau condenses the space of the social code. Instead of invoking themes of individual/society and modernity/tradition, I argue that such combinations present the spectator with shifting frames of visual knowledge, different sensoria of the subject.³¹ Indeed, rather than attach specific forms of subjectivity to specific modes of representation in a schematic way, I believe that there are instances when certain socially and ritually coded relationships are relayed through what is, after all, the mythicized individuation of the continuity mode. Central here is a particular discourse of the image and the look in indigenous conventions.

³¹ Vasudevan, 'Shifting codes, dissolving identities', pp. 61–5.

Visual codes of narration (II): looking

While visual codes deriving from mass visual culture are open to the dynamization of the sort I have described, they continue to retain a certain integrity of function, especially in the reproduction of authority structures. For example, hierarchies of power may develop around the image of a character. This character image becomes the authoritative focal point of a scene, occupying a certain privileged position which structures space as a force field of power. In contrast to formulations about looking which have become commonplace in the analysis of Hollywood cinema, the figure looked at is not necessarily subject to control but may in fact be the repository of authority. As Lawrence

32 Lawrence A. Babb, 'Glancing: visual interaction in Hinduism', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1981), pp. 387-401.

33 Diana Eck, *Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1981).

Devdas (Bimal Roy, 1955). Pictures courtesy: National Film Archive of India



Babb³² and Diana Eck³³ in their studies of looking in Hinduism have suggested, the operative terms here are *darsan dena* and *darsan lena*, the power to give the look, the privilege of receiving it. However, there may be other functions of looking in play, as when tension arises around the question of who bears authority. The look of the patriarch is privileged in such narrative moves. In a host of 1950s work, from *Awara/The Vagabond* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), *Baazi/The Wager* (Guru Dutt, 1951), *Aar Paar/Heads or Tails* (Guru Dutt, 1954) through the later work of Guru Dutt in *Pyaasa/The Thirsty One* (1957) and *Sahib, bibi aur ghulam/King, Queen, Jack* (Abrar Alvi/Guru Dutt, 1963), the patriarchal gaze is highlighted as a dark, controlling one, seeking to arrest the shift in the coordinates of desire and authority.

In terms of visual address, the residual traces of sacralization are still observable in the reposing of authority in the male image. The family narrative that underpins the Hindi cinema resorts to a transaction of authority around this image. The patriarch gives way to the son, his successor, at the story's conclusion. This male figure's authority is placed in position by the direction of a devotional female regard.

I will cite an example from *Devdas* (Bimal Roy, 1955), a film based on a well-known Bengali novel by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. Devdas, the son of a powerful landed family, is prohibited from marrying the girl he desires, Parvati, because of status differences. He is a classic renouncer figure of the type favoured in Indian storytelling, a figure who is unable, or refuses, to conform to the demands of society, and wastes away in the contemplation of that which he could never gain. I want to refer to a scene which employs continuity conventions to the highly 'traditional' end of deifying the male as object of desire. The sequence deals with Devdas's visit to Parvati's house, and indicates a strategy of narration whereby Parvati's point of view is used to underline the desirability and the authority exercised by Devdas's image. In this sequence, Parvati finds her grandmother and mother in the courtyard discussing Devdas's arrival from the city and the fact that he has not yet called upon them (fig. 1). Devdas, offscreen, calls from outside the door (fig. 2). From this moment, Parvati's auditory and visual attention dominates the narration. Before we can see Devdas entering the house, we withdraw with Parvati (fig. 3) to her room upstairs, and listen to the conversation taking place below along with her (fig. 4). Devdas announces that he will go to see Parvati himself. In anticipation of Devdas's arrival, Parvati hurriedly starts lighting a *diya*, a devotional lamp, and the melody of a *kirtan*, a traditional devotional song expressing Radha's longing for Krishna, is played. We hear the sound of Devdas's footfall on the stairs, and Parvati's anxiety to light the lamp (figs 5,7,9) before Devdas enters her room is caught by a suspenseful intercutting between her lighting of the lamp and shots of the empty doorway (fig. 6). The doorframe in this sequence suggests the shrine in which the divine idol is housed.



34 Sangari, 'Mirabai and the spiritual economy of Bhakti'.

Devdas's entry is shown in a highly deifying way; first his feet are shown in the doorway (fig. 8), followed by a cut to the lighted lamp (fig. 9). Finally his face is revealed (fig. 10). There follows a cut to Parvati (fig. 11), suggesting that this is the order through which she has seen Devdas's arrival. As she looks at him, in a classical point of view arrangement, conch shells, traditional accompaniment to the act of worship, are sounded. The future husband as deity, object of the worshipful gaze, is established by the narration's deployment of Parvati's point of view. Her lighting of the devotional lamp and the extra-diegetic sound of the *kirtan*, and conch-shells underline the devotional nature of the woman's relationship to the male image. Guru Dutt would use the doorframe to similar effect at the climax of *Pyaasa* and the *kirtan* from *Devdas* is used again on that occasion.

I have already suggested that filmic narration is subject to ambivalence in relaying the image of masculine authority through a desiring female look. Within the *bhakti* or devotional tradition, the female devotee's energy is channelled directly into the worship of the deity, without the mediation of the priest. However, the Lord still remains a remote figure, making of the devotional act a somewhat excessive one, concentrating greater attention on the devotee than the devotional object.³⁴ Another implication of this arrangement is that we are being invited to identify with the romantically unfulfilled woman character, a problematic position, perhaps, in terms of the gendering of spectatorship.

We need to retain a constant sense of the way the dominant tropes of narration are complicated by such features of excess. However, I still think it is necessary to acknowledge the framework of masculine authority within which female desire is finally held. And I suggest that we need to go back to the tableau and the framework of seeing provided by an iconic frontality to understand the ways in which the elaboration of filmic narration is determined by these imperatives.

In *Pyaasa* there is a scene in which the poet-hero, Vijay, refers to the prostitute, Gulab, as his wife in order to protect her from a policeman who is pursuing her. The prostitute is unaccustomed to such a respectful address, especially one suggestive of intimate ties to a man she loves, and is thrown into a sensual haze. Vijay ascends a stairway to the terrace of a building where he will pass the night. Gulab sees a troupe of devotional folk singers, *Bauls*, performing a song, *Aaj sajan mohe ang laga lo* (Take me in your arms today, O beloved), and follows Vijay up the stairs. The *baul* song is used to express Gulab's desire, and cutting and camera movement closely follow its rhythms. The scene is structured by these relations of desire, which are simultaneously relations of distance, as the woman follows, looks at and almost touches the man she loves (who is entirely unaware of all this) but finally withdraws and flees as she believes herself unworthy of him.

The relation between devotee and object of devotion determines the

space of this scene, it remains the structuring element in the extension and constraining of space. The relationship here is not that of the iconic frontality of traditional worship. The desired one is not framed in this way, for continuity codes dominate the scenic construction. Even in the scene I have cited from *Devdas*, continuity codes construct space and it is a shot/reverse shot relationship which defines the ultimate moment of looking. Nevertheless, if we think of the male icon as the crucial figure towards and from which the narration moves, we can see how a 'traditional' marker of authority and desire is the anchor to the spatializing of narrative. We have here something akin to a tableau constructed over a series of shots, its constituent elements – Gulab, Vijay and the performers – being ranged in a relatively consistent spatial relationship to each other. From the point of view of the male spectator, what is being underwritten is not, or not only, the subordinate position in the act of looking, it is a moment which uses looking to relay his own desirability to him.

The sociopolitical referent

The relaying of patriarchal authority through reorganized tableaux, the transfer of the authoritative image from one character to another, and the presence of an empowering female look, present the essential visual–narrational transaction. In this sense there is a certain rearticulation of traditional authority and hierarchies of the visual culture into the narrational procedures of the cinema. Hollywood codes of narration, oriented to generate linear narrative trajectories motivated by character point of view and action are employed. But what is of interest is that they are used to 'enshrine' the male character in the female look as I have described, or to route the male character back to an original family identity. This latter narrative trajectory is widely observable in the series of popular crime films of the 1950s, such as *Awara*, *Baazi*, *Aar Paar* and *CID* (Raj Khosla, 1956). This circularity has something to do with the particular structures of the family narrative in the 1940s and 1950s. Something akin to a Freudian family romance was at work, in which the fantasy that the child has parents other than those who bring him up is played out. In the Hindi social film, instead of a fantasy of upward mobility, a democratizing downward spiral is set in motion, the hero being precipitated into a life of destitution and crime. The circling back, the recovery of identity, is then tied to a normalization of social experience, a recovery of the reassuring coordinates of social privilege.³⁵

As a result, in line with dominant ideological currents in the wake of independence, the social film of the 1950s expanded the terms of social reference, urged an empathy towards social deprivation and invited a vicarious identification with such states. But the recovery of

³⁵ For an elaboration of this narrative structure, see my 'Dislocations'.

the hero at the conclusion finally underlines the middle-class identity that structures the narrative. However, certain shifts are observable in the nature of family narrative and the recovery of identity. In socials of the 1940s such as *Kangan/The Bracelet* (Franz Osten, 1940) and *Kismet*, there is a proper reconciliation between son and father, and a type of joint family structure seems to be back in place. By the 1950s, however, the hero's recovery of identity and social position does not result in reconciliation with the father, but the positing of a new family space. This nuclear family is formed in alignment with the state, as if politics and personality were allied in a common project of transformation.

Indeed, while I have tried to suggest the ways the popular film seeks to integrate new forms of subjectivity into more conventional tropes, it is important that we retain the signs, however fragmentary, of other subjectivities in play, whether these express the drives of individualized perception, of an assertive masculinity, or the recovery of the popular conventions of female devotion. I have suggested elsewhere, in a study of *Andaz*, that the popular cinema of this period drew upon Hollywood narrative conventions in order to highlight the enigmatic dimensions of its female character's desires. The film was notable for its use of hallucinations and dreams to define the heroine in terms of an ambivalent psychology and as agent of a transgressive but involuntary sexuality. Such conventions were drawn upon to be contained and disavowed. A nationalist modernizing imperative had to symbolically contain those ideologically fraught aspects of modernity that derived from transformations in the social position and sexual outlook of women. The result was a fascinatingly perverse and incoherent text, one whose ideological achievements are complicated by the subjectivities it draws upon.³⁶

³⁶ Vasudevan, ' "You cannot live in society – and ignore it" '.

A 'national' spectator

The terms of cinematic narration I have sketched here are rather different from the notions of spectatorship which have emerged from that model of the successful commodity cinema, Hollywood. Historians and theoreticians of the US cinema have underlined the importance of continuity editing in binding or suturing the spectator into the space of the fiction. The undercutting of direct address and the binding of the spectator into a hermetic universe onscreen heightens the individual psychic address and sidelines the space of the auditorium as a social and collective viewing space. This very rich historiography and textual analysis³⁷ speaks of the fraught process through which US cinema's bourgeois address came into being. This work describes how social and ethnic peculiarities were addressed in the relation between early cinema and its viewers. The process by which the cinema took over and came to develop its own

³⁷ See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

entertainment space was a process of the formation of a national market in which the spectator had to be addressed in the broadest, non-ethnic, socially universal terms. Of course, what was actually happening was that a dominant white Anglo-Saxon norm came to be projected as universal. Along with this process, there developed the guidelines for the construction of a universal spectator placed not in the auditorium but as an imaginary figure enmeshed in the very process of narration.

The mixed address of the Hindi cinema, along with the song and dance sequences and comic skits which open up within the commercial film, suggests a rather different relationship of reception. Indeed, it recalls the notion of a 'cinema of attractions', a term developed by Tom Gunning to theorize the appeal of early Euro-American cinema.³⁸ In contrast to the Hollywood mode of continuity cinema or narrative integration, Gunning argues that early cinema was exhibitionist. The character's look into the camera indicated an indifference to the realist illusion that the story tells itself without mediation. The films displayed a greater interest in relaying a series of views and sensations to their audience rather than following a linear narrative logic. These elements were to be increasingly transcended in the Hollywood cinema's abstraction of the spectator as individuated consumer of its self-enclosed fictional world. In the process, the audience, earlier understood to be composed of workers and immigrants, was 'civilized' into appreciating the bourgeois virtues of a concentrated, logical, character-based narrative development.³⁹

Elements of this formulation of a cinema of attractions are clearly applicable to the Bombay film. But the Bombay cinema too was engaged in creating standard, universalizing reference points. To understand the processes by which the Hindi cinema acquired certain acceptable 'national' standards, we have to be able to identify how it took over certain widespread narrational norms from the past. But alongside this, we also need to examine how it was involved in constructing certain overarching cultural norms that suppressed the representation of marginal currents in Indian narrative and aesthetic traditions.

Research into the urban theatre of the nineteenth century will provide one point of entry into the understanding of the process by which narrational norms were transmitted to the cinema. This theatre presaged the cinema in its negotiation of western form, of technology, of narrative, even of a notion of entertainment time.⁴⁰ But it was also reputedly a great indigenizer, appropriating other traditions into Indian narrative trajectories. One narrational function that was carried from the theatre was that of a narratorial position external to the story, reminiscent of the *sutradhar* or narrator of traditional theatre. The comic, or *vidushak*, also left his mark as one of the staple figures of the commercial cinema.⁴¹ Here he sometimes plays the role of a narrator external to the main narrative and is often engaged in a

38 Gunning, 'The cinema of attraction'.

39 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, chapters 1 and 2.

40 A. Yusuf Ali, 'The modern Hindustani drama', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, vol. 35 (1917), pp. 89–90.

41 For an account of the *sutradhar* and the *vidushak*, see M. L. Varadpande, *Traditions of Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1978), pp. 84–5; also David Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

relationship of direct address to the audience. There is a certain didacticism involved in his functions. In a more commonplace function, it is the very absurdity of the comic figure, quite obviously opposed to the larger-than-life attraction of the hero, which invites a less flattering point of identification for the audience, and thereby a certain narratorial distance towards the story. Further, in the very superfluity of his functions, we could say that the comic was the spokesman within the story for a different order of storytelling, one which celebrates the disaggregative relationship to narrative.

But the main repository of such a narratorial externality to the main story and its process of narration is what I would term the 'narrational song'. This is enacted by a source other than any of the fictional characters. Through such a song, we are offered an insight into the emotional attitude of individual characters and the wider cultural and even mythic significance of certain actions and events. For example, when Devdas leaves Parvati in Bimal Roy's *Devdas*, Parvati listens to *Baul* singers as they sing of Radha's sorrow at Krishna's departure. This is a direct representation of her mood, but in addition to emotional attitudes, the song also represents a highly conventionalized cultural idiom.

The embedding of such cultural idioms offers us a stance, quite ritualistic in its intelligibility, towards the development of the narrative. We are both inside and outside the story, tied at one moment to the seamless flow of a character-based narration from within, in the next attuned to a culturally familiar stance from without. This may not be a simple, normative move on the part of the narration; indeed, we may be offered a critical view on narrative development. Significantly, such culturally familiar narratorial stances are sometimes separate from the space of the fiction. Not only are they performed by characters otherwise superfluous to the main storyline, there is often also an actual disjunction between the space of the story and that of the narrator. In this sense, the narrational song can be identified with the properties of the extra-fictional music used on the soundtrack. They both inhabit a space outside the fiction and alert us to a certain point of view or emotional disposition which we find culturally intelligible.

The disaggregation of address in Hindi cinema, such as is found in the external narrator and the comic and musical sequence, therefore integrates with a recognizable set of conventions. Further, the Bombay cinema also generates an enlarged and standardized identity across these divergent points of address. This can be located in this cinema's construction of masculine authority and its privileging of a symbolic Hindu identity. The outlines of such a masculine subjectivity were accompanied by a sharper delineation of sexual difference than that within the original cultural idiom. The androgynous aspects of Krishna's sexual identity are marginalized by fixing the male position as the object of sensual female regard and devotion.⁴² For all the

⁴² This can be seen as part of an epochal re-fashioning of Krishna, suggestively presented in Nandy, 'The intelligent film critic's guide'.

⁴³ Uma Chakravarty, 'The development of the Sita myth: a case study of women in myth and literature', *Samya Shakti*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1983), pp. 68–75; also Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: the Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ Patricia Uberoi, 'Feminine identity and national ethos in Indian calendar art', *Economic and Political Weekly*, women's studies section, vol. 25, no. 28 (1990), pp. 41–8.

⁴⁵ All references are taken from Bombay, Home Department, Political file no. 313/1940. Maharashtra State Archives.

richness of its ambiguous use of female desire and its unconventional articulation of the hero's masculinity, Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* is quite clear about the imperative of fixing a masculine locus of authority in its conclusion. Perhaps we have here a symbolic nationalist reformulation of culture in the cinema, undercutting the space for marginal discourses, and seeking to control ambiguity in the relationship between gender and power. Historians such as Uma Chakravarty have shown how this takes place in revisions of the Ramayana,⁴³ and Patricia Uberoi has suggested that a similar process, aligned to high-caste images of women as subordinate, self-effacing and motherly, took place in the culture of the calendar print.⁴⁴ These patterns may help us identify the universalizing ambition of the Hindi cinema, despite its disaggregative features. The scope of universalization lies not merely in the subordination of all elements to narrative, but in ensuring that multiple and tangential tracks never exceed the limits of the dominant address. This implies that the concept of the cinema of attractions needs to be rethought when it becomes the characteristic, long-term feature of a national commodity cinema.

Identifying a contextual address to the spectator

In the last part of this paper, I want to refer to a more historically specific address through which a symbolic identity was negotiated by the cinema. I will argue that, although the language of the Bombay cinema is Hindustani and therefore the product of cultural interaction between Muslim and Hindu culture, the spectator of the commercial cinema is primarily positioned in relation to the overarching Hindu symbolic identity relayed through the cinema. This is effected through the types of cultural address which I have described, through narrational song, gender idiom and modes of visual address. The strongly Hindu cultural connotation of these features is so pervasive that it is invariably thought of as the norm, rather than as a historically specific project for spectatorial identification. In the early 1940s, however, the industry became much more self-conscious about its market, and how it was to be addressed. In making this observation, I am merely sketching out certain guidelines for research rather than laying out the definite time scale and the range of resources used to put together the symbolic narrative of the Hindu nation. Preliminary findings suggest the importance of this line of enquiry.

In 1937, the All India League for Censorship, a private body, was set up to lobby for stringent measures in regard to what was perceived to be an anti-Hindu dimension in the film industry.⁴⁵ It claimed that the industry was dominated by Muslims and Parsis who wanted to show the Hindus 'in a bad light'. Muslim actors and Muslim characters were used, it declared, to offer a contrast with Hindu

characters, portrayed as venal, effete and oppressive. The League evidently assumed that the government of Bombay, led by the Indian National Congress, would be responsive to their demand that certain films be banned for their so-called anti-Hindu features. Such expectations were belied by K. M. Munshi, Home Minister in the Bombay Government, who dismissed the League as bigoted. Indeed, this was how the League must have appeared at the time. But their charges do bring to light the fact that certain offscreen information, that is, the religious identity of producers, directors and actors, was being related to the onscreen narrative, and in fact was seen to constitute a critical social and political level of the narrative.

It is against this background that we should situate the as yet rudimentary information which suggests that in the next decade the industry itself was coming to project an address to its market which clearly apprehended and sought to circumvent Hindu alienation. Syed Hasan Manto, who had written scripts for Hindi films, recalled that he was pressurized to leave his job in the early 1940s because he was a Muslim. Indeed, Bombay Talkies, the studio for which Manto worked from 1946 to 1948, came under threat from Hindu extremists who demanded that the studio's Muslim employees be sacked.⁴⁶ At a more symbolic level, a process seems to have been inaugurated by which the roles of hero and heroine, which normally remain outside the purview of stereotypes associated with other characters, had to be played by actors with Hindu names. In 1943, when Yusuf Khan was inducted as a male lead by Devika Rani at Bombay Talkies, his name was changed, as is well known, to Dilip Kumar. In the actor's account, the change was quite incidental.⁴⁷ But we have information about other Muslim actors and actresses who underwent name changes, such as Mahzabin, who became Meena Kumar,⁴⁸ and Nawab, who became Nimmi;⁴⁹ and, in 1950 a struggling actor, Hamid Ali Khan changed his name to Ajit on the advice of the director, K. Amarnath.⁵⁰ I am sure that this short list is but the beginning of a much longer one, and an oral history might uncover something akin to a parallel universe of concealed identities. The transaction involved seems to have been purely symbolic. Evidence from film periodicals suggests that the true identity of such actors was mostly well known, and yet an abnegation of identity was undertaken in the development of the star personality. It is as if the screen, constituting an imaginary nation space, required the fulfilment of certain criteria before the actor/actress could acquire a symbolic eligibility.

Following in the tracks of the Hindu communal censorship League of 1937, *Filmindia*, the sensationalist film periodical edited by Baburao Patel, showed that a bodily sense of communal difference had come to inflect a certain reception of film images. *Filmindia*, incensed in 1949 when demonstrations prevented the screening of *Barsaat/Monsoon* (Raj Kapoor, 1949) in Pakistan,⁵¹ was delighted to see two Muslim actresses, Nimmi and Nargis, kiss the feet of

⁴⁶ See the introduction to Saadat Hasan Manto, *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, trans. Khalid Hasan (London: Verso Books, 1987).

⁴⁷ *Filmfare*, 26 April 1957, p. 77.

⁴⁸ *Filmfare*, 17 October 1952, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *Filmfare*, 28 November 1952, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Ajit, interviewed by Anjali Joshi, *Sunday Observer*, Delhi, 16 December 1991. For some ideas about the onscreen ramifications of Hamid Ali Khan's change of name, see my 'Dislocations'.

⁵¹ *Filmindia*, April 1950, p. 13.

Premnath and Raj Kapoor in the latter's *Barsaat*. In an ironic aside, the gossip columns of the periodical suggested that, to balance this act of submission, a Muslim director such as Kardar should now arrange to have a Hindu actress kiss Dilip Kumar's feet. Clearly, it was understood that such an inversion was not a likely scenario, and a vicarious pleasure was being taken in this symbolic triumph.⁵² How much of these offscreen discourses actually went into the structuring of onscreen narratives? It seems to me no coincidence that in the same year in which *Filmindia* carried this dark communal reception of *Barsaat*, in *Andaz*, a film by a Muslim director Mehboob, Nargis should again be seeking to touch Raj Kapoor's feet, desperate to demonstrate her virtue as a true Indian wife, and to clear herself of charges of being involved with Dilip Kumar. The image of the star is not just reiterated in this interweaving of on- and offscreen narratives; there is an active working out and resolution of the transgressive features which have come to be attached to him/her. For example, speculations about Nargis's family background and suspicions of her chastity following her affair with Raj Kapoor seemed to repetitively feed into, and be resolved within, a host of films from *Andaz* to *Bewafa/Faithless* (M. L. Anand, 1952), *Laajwanti/Woman of Honour* (Rajinder Suri, 1957) and *Mother India*.⁵³

53 For further reflections about Nargis's career, see Rosie Thomas, 'Sanctity and scandal in *Mother India*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1989), pp. 11–30; and Vasudevan, '“You cannot live in society – and ignore it”'.

The way in which this symbolic space was charted out by the Hindi commercial cinema is comparable to the way in which the white hero became the norm for the US commercial cinema and, preeminently, his WASP version. In both cases, the ideological construction of this space appears to be neatly effaced, but the discourses surrounding the films clearly indicate that this was not so.

In this symbolic space, the minorities too can have a presence, usually as subordinate ally of the Hindu hero. But we must not forget the specific address the industry made to the Muslim community in the form of the Muslim social film. Unfortunately, I have not seen enough of these to be able to situate them adequately within or against the grain of Hindu nationhood. *Elaan/Announcement* (Mehboob Khan, 1948) falls into this category, and it clearly urges the Muslim community to emulate its educated sections and pursue the path of modernization. Perhaps the pejorative and ideologically loaded implication of this specific address was that the wider society, comprising the Hindus, had already made this advance.

Conclusion

I have suggested that we must situate the whole project of the Hindi commercial cinema in its cultural context, that of a mass visual culture which displays certain rules of address, composition and placement. Through the deciphering of this system, we shall be able to understand the position given to the spectator, the types of identity he or she is

offered. This starting point will enable us to hold on to the historical spectator as he/she is moved through regimes of subjectivity set up by generic and social address, and by the integration of a new dynamic of narration from the Hollywood cinema. In citing these imperatives of analysis, I seek to problematize a dominant paradigm in Indian criticism. This has focused on the particular familial rhetoric of the popular cinema to suggest that its address disavows the 'real' and reflects significant cognitive and political dispositions in its spectator. In a word, this is a disposition which seeks to counter a rational outlook, seen by the popular cinema's critics as the basis of a modern society and nation state; in certain anti-modern interpretations, such failings may actually constitute a virtue.

In contrast, in my reading of cinematic narratives, we can observe the refashioning of the spectator in accordance with certain new compulsions, a streamlining of narrative form around the drives of individualized characters. Instead of an unqualified assimilation of such drives, the transformation is held within a culturally familiar visual economy centred on a transaction around the image of male authority. But there are always excessive aspects to this process of cultural 'domestication', and we need to retain a sense, however fragmentary, of the range of subjectivities which are called into play by the negotiatory features of narrative construction.

The Hindi cinema displays a disaggregative address in its structures, quite in contrast to the narrative integrity and spectatorial enmeshing of another successful commodity cinema, that of Hollywood's classical narrative cinema. However, I have argued that despite this a coherence can be discerned in the limits set by dominant discourses to otherwise diverse narrative and performative strands. Even disaggregation, I have suggested, has certain binding features in the way it articulates the spectator to earlier practices of narration and to many points of cultural institution and investment. In other words, it performs a symbolic remapping of identity and suppresses other more complicated traditions of gender, of Hinduism and other forms of culture. It is through this process of standardization that the cinema constitutes an enlarged, transcendent identity for its spectator.

Finally, I have suggested that, from the 1940s, contextual information gleaned from discourses about the cinema indicated that such a 'national' project was yoked to constructions of the Indian nation as one dominated by the Hindu, and was arrived at through symbolic transactions of offscreen identity and onscreen narrative.

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Women reading Chinese films: between orientalism and silence

STEPHANIE DONALD

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed . . .¹

. . . today planned authenticity is rife: as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of hegemony and universal standardization, it constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression.²

¹ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Difference – a special third world women's issue', *Discourse*, vol. 8 (Fall/Winter 1986–7), pp. 15–16.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.

The reading of texts across cultures can deliver discoveries that throw time, habits of perception and memory into conceptual turmoil. The texts I am considering here are films made in mainland China during the 1980s, *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Sacrifice of Youth* (Zhang Nuanxin, 1985). My discussion is inspired by the writings of two contemporary cultural critics, Rey Chow and Esther Yau, and of the filmmaker and theorist, Trinh Minh-ha. I turned to these writers for guidance in the bothered territories of cross-border feminism. They have authentic, and self-proclaimed, voices of 'Otherness'. I have nothing but an uneasiness with my supposed 'self', and a stubborn determination to investigate that which is not my Self, but which might possibly be my chosen – and constitutive – Other.

Their work led me first to the terrible twins, authenticity and narcissism. Or are they the other way round? As Trinh Minh-ha says, authenticity cuts both ways. It may allow legitimacy for the speaker, but also it may be a 'planned authenticity' born of another's narcissistic desire. In which case the authentic is silenced. But, as both

Yau and Chow exclaim, equally that which is inauthentic, neither Other nor narcissistic Self, is hardly heard. Once warned of the totalizing and exclusionary nature of this ideal and unhappy couple, however, the pairing proved very useful for my readings of *Sacrifice of Youth* and *Yellow Earth*. In fact it yielded more than I expected. The structure of *Sacrifice of Youth* is dependent on the narcissistic eye of the camera and the represented narcissism of the main character. In *Yellow Earth*, the narcissism of the Party is used ironically to reveal the inauthentic centre of its own history. In both films narcissism operates via discourses of the authentic, the authentic other as well as the authentic historical subject, to create a crisis in time. It is this crisis, this tension between the historical, the contemporary and the eternal which I want to elaborate here.

Marketing the crisis

The 1980s new wave in Chinese cinema moved away from socialist realism and unreflexive melodrama in order to confront the traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution and of earlier struggles since Liberation in 1949. The move involved a reinvention of film language and a reinvestment in pre-Liberation history. This return to history, in such films as *Yellow Earth*, *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1989), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1992), was more than an inventive and pragmatic avoidance of censorship³ (although it may have been that too). It was a sign of a new contemporaneity which located the present through claiming synchronicity – and therefore equivalence – with the past.

The need for this new contemporaneity was created by the ructions in Party policy after the death of Mao in 1976, and after the third plenum in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping announced the coming of reform. The push for economic reform in the 1980s was partly a bid for material success and relegitimation for the Party and partly a (connected) new guise for the competitive relationship between China and the West. It caused a diachronic crisis as modern development outpaced the reformation of a national memory. As Gordon White says:

the project of market orientated reform, while clearly a response to glaring deficiencies in the previous economic system, was given a particularly powerful impetus as a response to problems caused by China's previous *political* experience. In essence the economic reforms were an attempt to re-establish the hegemonic authority of the Communist party on a different basis: by abandoning the Maoist notion of development as a political struggle and attempting to accelerate economic development and increase the material welfare of the population more rapidly. Success in the latter, it was hoped, would provide a new form of legitimacy for the regime.⁴

³ Chris Berry, 'Neither one thing nor another – towards a study of the viewing subject and the Chinese cinema in the 1980s', in Browne, Pickowicz, Sobchack, Yau (eds), *New Chinese Cinemas* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 88–113.

⁴ Gordon White, *Riding The Tiger* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Books, 1993), p. 11.

5 The Han form the largest ethnic group in China, ninety-four per cent of the population.

The link between economic improvements and legitimacy was undermined on 4 June 1989, when thousands were massacred or imprisoned at Tiananmen Square and across China. Meanwhile, the State continued the Maoist policy of denying to different groups and ethnicities within the population access to their modern subjectivities – so necessary in order to articulate the pace and voice of reform and entry into a market-led economy.

Whilst concurring with the breakdown of ideology, Han⁵ filmmakers found it hard to address the present or past except through a very particular urban Han perspective. Critics, too, are in a quandary as they look at new Chinese films with the expectations of western postmodern academics and/or the nostalgic yearnings of diasporic Chinese. With ideology gone, there is space for the modern, but this requires an authentic Other – or premodern source – which is not easy to find when social and political history has been replayed and rewritten so often, and when filmmakers, writers and artists themselves are engaged in that task once again.

Interlude

The clean riverbed lies still in grey winter mists;
 Recollections from home recede.
 Drowsy memory jerks up its head,
 Men's everlasting myths have spread to the kingdom of swine.

And so another rebellious sail is raised,
 Soaked through with drunkenness, sticky with bloodstains.
 Drifting from the kingdom of swine to the kingdom of dogs.
 All around, mountain ranges and mighty rivers rise and fall,
 Stretching out endlessly.⁶

6 From Fei Ye, 'The riverbed of exile', trans. Sauliey Wong, reproduced from a communication from the author, 1994. At time of writing Fei Ye is living in Berkeley. In 1979, in his hometown of Harbin, he edited the underground magazine *Lone Army*. Sauliey Wong is professor of Asian-American studies at UC Berkeley.

Fei Ye is a poet living in exile in the USA. He describes the exile's plight as that of a sailor who can no longer recognize himself in the peoples of the places whence he came or whither he must travel. He is cut off from the kingdom of men, which perhaps in any case only exists in the exiled imagination. The landscape of despair is forbidding and without a point of entry for any who do not recognize themselves as dogs or swine. The mountain ranges are a conspiracy of silencing, enclosing a space in which one can be seen but not heard over the roar of the river.

The contemporary, the historical and the silences in between

The films under discussion are chosen both for their historical and their contemporary relevance. I distinguish historicity and

contemporaneity in both cases as these texts bear both the inscription of Chinese history as well as an ironic patina – a reflexive sense of belonging to the contemporary mode. These films show that the meaning of contemporary is not a chronological issue, but relies on the synchronicity of a popular consciousness at a particular time and in a particular place. Being contemporary is not a state that we can always assume to be our own, nor one that we necessarily share with those around us. To live in the present demands that we are aware of our present and our past as negotiable constructs of memory. This undermines the notion of a homogeneous society with an equalized, common mode of address between members. The present will be differently experienced and expressed by all those who know themselves to live within it.

There is still however the possibility of consensus, a social imagination which works through the contributions of the whole heterogeneous population, and which is bounded and defined by the sum of the scope of the present as it is known at any point. *Without* an alert consensus, the social imagination can drift into suspension, animated only by idealistic identifications and by the unspoken (and, if spoken, unheeded or imprisoned) recalcitrance of the unwilling individual or group. This dissidence is an appeal for the right to contemporaneity, a plea for possibility and for entry into the agency of the symbolic. Taking Lacanian-inspired accounts of the symbolic as a starting point, one of the conditions of contemporaneity may be described as the possibility of entry into a symbolic world in which one can function as a (speaking) agent within the externalized organization of a compatible social imagination. If a prevailing symbolic organization is antithetical to entry, then particular individuals cannot achieve voice or agency. If no one is listening, or is even able to listen, can one be sure that a voice is making any sound at all? If there is no former self nor any shared symbolic order, no social imagination in which and through which to frame one's speech, dissidence can seem like madness, and contemporary relevance is not easily sustained.

The silencing of the artist or the critic, through censorship, demonstrates the total control over the symbolic order demanded in a state socialist regime. Artist and critic are condemned as inauthentic. They are not the madmen of dissidence for they are quite obviously functioning as mediators, trying to prise their way into the social imaginary with aesthetic tricks and barbed wit. Therefore they must be silenced within a different nexus of exclusion. As *inauthentic*, they have neither the confidence of the narcissistic Self nor the doubtful honour of necessary Otherness. They hover between one subjectivity and another, seeing both and inhabiting neither.

And yet, in international political terms, they might be heard quite distinctly, and highly valued as voices of truth – to an outside ear with its own narcissistic agenda. They then lose the freedom, and near

madness, of the inauthentic, and are promoted as the authentic soul of a troubled regime. Thus psychic and actual silencing throws into the discussion questions of international readership and casts doubt on the legitimacy of a contemporaneity that exists only in the free imaginations of the outside observer, but which is stifled in terms of local production, distribution and exhibition. Banned films assume a moral authority and authenticity in the eyes of a select international spectatorship – and films are often banned in China.

A question that therefore hovers behind this discussion is whether the production and critical reception of such films may be seen as an international contemporary mode that is not shared with the large majority of potential domestic audiences. If that is so, the discovery and definition of the authentic becomes more prized, and probably more illusory.

The postmodern colonial rub

Rey Chow has argued that the reversion to a discourse of authenticity is a symptom of the reflex colonialism of the western critic. When trying to confront the internal problems of critical subjectivity, the critic is wont to give up and reflect instead on the authenticity that they perceive in others and wish for themselves. In particular she has cited Kristeva's *On Chinese Women* as an example of an internal argument being projected onto an international metaphor – here, China, the feminine, the oriental:

Even though Kristeva sees China in an interesting and, indeed, 'sympathetic' way, there is nothing in her arguments as such that cannot be said without 'China'. What she proposes is not so much learning a lesson from a different culture as a different method of reading from within the West.⁷

This reading of Kristeva's 'colonial discourse' is also commented upon by Homi Bhabha who quotes Kristeva's work on China as an example of

an inevitable sliding from the semiotic activity to the unproblematic reading of other cultural and discursive systems. There is in such readings a will to power and knowledge that, in failing to specify the limits of their own field of enunciation and effectivity, proceeds to individualize otherness as the discovery of their own assumptions.⁸

Chow and Bhabha differ in their conclusions however. They link the practice of the western critic to that of the colonial formation of the subject. Bhabha then embraces hybridity. Chow perceives that the authentication of the Other is meretricious. It is a way of dissolving the psychic link between the postcolonial subject – she cites herself,

7 Rey Chow, 'Seeing modern China', in *Women and Chinese Modernity – the Politics of Reading Between East and West* (Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 7.

8 Homi Bhabha, 'The other question', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70.

Hong Kong Chinese, as an example – and the imagined Authentic Other. The narcissistic need of the colonizer dismisses one as a modern travesty and uses the other as a fully determined projection of its missing entrails. In a world of hegemony and actual power, both groups are thus severely disadvantaged.

Chow further conceives of 'the postmodernity of the colonized',⁹ whereby it is only in the West that modernity and postmodernity can be conceptualized as chronological. She argues that for all people who have been colonized, postmodernity came before modernity, in so far as the fragmentation of an authentic self was necessitated by the narcissistic demands of the colonizer. The native had to be recognizably native and traditional in order to satisfy the westerners' modernist self-justification of invasion. The colonizers had to believe themselves engaged in the Enlightenment project of spreading the light of rationality in the realms of darkness, and they had to show signs of the success of this civilizing project. The native therefore had to be seen to be educated in western habits of thought and belief. She/he could not however expect to form any part of the *structure* of that system except to remain as the reflective Other, which was perpetually in the place of a subaltern in need of further civilization.¹⁰ Chow claims, therefore, that the colonized develop a self-awareness necessary to exist within the dual environments of the invader's culture and their own, which also contributes to the hybridity that forms between the two norms.¹¹

For someone with my educational background, which is British Colonial and American, the moralistic charge of my being 'too Westernized' is devastating; it signals an attempt on the part of those who are specialists in 'my' culture to demolish the only premises on which I can speak.¹²

Here Chow seems to both bewail and disavow her postmodern identity. For surely she has many premises on which she *must* speak? She is claiming that within the symbolic order of western academia she is silenced by her positioning as oriental woman with an inappropriately western voice. Yet she claims that her voice is specifically that of the postmodern postcolonial, and therefore speaks between the monolithic voices of imperial cultures. She risks constructing another monolith, as her account of colonial postmodernity suggests that these conditions of existence will always produce an ideal type which is always forced into silence or compliance. Moreover, despite Chow's stated aversion to Bhabha's notion of hybridity, his work is very useful in understanding in more positive terms her own expressions of the postmodern/colonial predicament. In his essay 'Of mimicry and man'¹³ Bhabha explores

the comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects whereby mimicry emerges as one of

9 Chow's argument can be traced throughout her collection of essays: Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 51–4 and 546–7.

10 Much of Chow's perspective is taken from her reading of Gayatri Chavakorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

11 Chow has criticized Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a get-out clause for colonial hegemonic voices: see, Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p. 35. However I incorporate the idea here as I read many of her analyses as leading to a similar conclusion, whether or not she describes it as such.

12 Rey Chow, 'Violence in the other country', in Mohanty, Russo and Torres (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 91.

13 Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', in *The Location of Culture*.

the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. . . . Within that conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination . . . and the counter pressure of the diachrony of history . . . mimicry represents an ironic compromise.¹⁴

Bhabha constructs his 'mimic man' as a presence in the colonial and postcolonial worlds that comments on the identity of the colonizer through its imperfect reproduction of the behaviour and moral reactions of that party. The point is not that the mimicry creates a simplified stereotype of the invasive culture, nor that the exclusion from the underlying symbolic structure of colonial culture finally renders the mimic subject powerless within that structure. From the colonizer's perspective, the mimicry is induced so that the desire for difference may be contained in powerless signifiers. For the colonized, entry into a symbolic order that is only completed through the reduction of Other peoples to fixers of desire could only ever be harmful.

But what of Chinese film? Is it as fraught with complexity as one could guess by simply looking at a map of the enormous geographical range, and ethnic diversity that is called China?

Esther Yau engages with the arguments of Chow and Bhabha, but she reads China from without whilst engaging with a kind of 'colonial discourse' from within. In her work on Chinese film, she notes that unacknowledged narcissism is here too, at the point of production and reception. When a film concerns the non-Han peoples, the authorial voice is still unmistakably 'Chinese', as in Han/dominant culture, and the narrative turns on representations of minority peoples who must accommodate the desires and absences in the lives of the Han audience. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it is the feminine attributes of these peoples that are elaborated, exaggerated and exploited for the pleasure of a sexually confined spectator. *Sacrifice of Youth* tries to tackle the problems of crosscultural representation. In formalist terminology, the film has a story and plot in which most of the characters portrayed in the film, the Dai, are relevant only as tools of narration.

The story of *Sacrifice of Youth* concerns an urbling, Li Chun, a teenage girl sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. She goes to a Dai village, the Dai being one of the minority peoples living on the peripheries of Chinese territory. She is a Han, the dominant group in China, and the film traces her experience of living within a different culture that is still Chinese – in terms of geographical and political influence. The story from which the script is taken is called *Such a Beautiful Place*, and the film slips rather easily into voyeuristic meditations on the endearing beauty of the Other within, the Dai – who are apparently all kind and gentle (except for her adoptive Dai brother and admirer who is seen to get violent when

drunk and rejected, and who, her [Han] voiceover informs us, is more like a Min), work hard, sing and dance and never offer an opinion on their contemporary situation. Any commentary is given by Li Chun, the Han visitor, or by Ren Ju, her Han boyfriend who is posted in a neighbouring village. Effective comments from Dai characters are rare. Her Dai 'father' advises her in an early scene, 'You should make yourself pretty', and Yali (the prettiest of the Dai girls who is herself in love with Li Chun's Dai 'brother'), snaps at her after the two suitors have been fighting, 'You should go away, you don't know how to love him, you are not one of us' – but these remarks come from the same place or speak in the same voice. They are about an eternal Dai-ness from which Li Chun can come or go, but which is represented as internally immutable.

In some respects, the film is a valiant attempt to reform a particular genre of post Liberation Chinese cinema. A Han director, Zhang Nuanxin, who based her script on the semi-autobiographical novel of another Han woman, Zhang Manling, has produced a sympathetic and very beautiful portrait of the Dai people. As Esther Yau has recorded, some of the representational practices in the film are a direct attempt to undercut the ethnographic films of the years of Mao and socialist realism when Han, and especially Party, hegemony meant that minority people were always shown on a teleological journey towards Han-led liberation.¹⁵ In these films, non-Han characters were played by Han actors and actresses. There was little, if any, dialogue in the regional language, and the characters were valorized according to how completely they assimilated themselves into the Party project of national identity. The films tended, as have most Chinese films since the 1920s, towards melodrama and spectacle.¹⁶

Zhang Nuanxin's attempts to subvert the genre aligns her work with younger, contemporary 1980s filmmakers. Her attempt is marked with ambiguity as she struggles to divorce sexuality from its accepted signs in a puritanical Han culture. Dru Gladney has described the importance of minority women's bodies in Han culture as a visual displacement of sexual desire. He argues that they also provide a national style and metaphorical resource for cultural production that would otherwise struggle to represent the Han to themselves. One of the most common settings for this national resource is the nude bathing scene which has been repeated across China in many unlikely settings, including murals at the Beijing International Airport – which were removed after outraged complaints from minority representatives.¹⁷

The image of Dai (Thai) and other minority women bathing in the river has become a leitmotiv for ethnic sexuality and often appears in stylised images throughout China, particularly on large murals in restaurants and public spaces.¹⁸

Zhang's own bathing scene, of Dai girls slipping their dresses off and gliding out into the river, is transgressive in so far as a Han girl

15 Esther Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics? Or, political and cultural usage of non-Han women in mainland Chinese films', *Discourse*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1989), pp. 115–36. See also her article, 'Cultural and economic dislocations: filmic phantasies of Chinese women in the 1980s', *Wide Angle*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1989), pp. 6–21.

16 See Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for an overview of Chinese film. See also Paul Pickowicz, 'Melodramatic representation and the "May 4th" tradition of Chinese cinema', in David Der-wei Wang and Ellen Widmer (eds), *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 295–326; and E. Ann Kaplan, 'Melodrama, subjectivity, ideology: the relevance of western melodrama theories to recent Chinese cinema', *East West Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1991), pp. 6–27.

17 For a discussion of this and other debates around the visual arts see: Marie Claire Huot, *La Petite Révolution Culturelle* (Arles: Editions Philippe Picquier, 1994).

18 Dru C. Gladney, 'Representing nationality in China: refiguring majority/minority identities', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1994), pp. 92–123.

spectates onscreen, and regrets that she cannot participate in the swimming. Yet by the end of the scene her voiceover has informed us that she will soon learn to swim naked herself. Therefore, in this instance, the gaze of the Han spectator cannot indulge its desire without acknowledging the sexual potential of the Han girl. At the same time, sexual potential is still firmly located in the minority spectacle. Here a kind of mimicry in reverse is at work. The Han girl imitates the dress and habits of the Dai, but can finally only seek recuperation into her former social identity. She will leave her onscreen sexual potential back in the river.

Zhang's cinematography also veers away from established practices of socialist realism. Yau observes that:

She makes a number of experiments new for Chinese film practices, including shooting in sync sound, setting up elaborate long takes, filming in extremely low light situations, and handling in an unusually sensitive way what can be a monotonous green colour in that sub-tropical environment.¹⁹

Certainly the cinematographic style is painterly rather than paintbox. The marks of socialist realism have been rubbed hard, not quite erased, but blurred. There is no one looking into a socialist realist horizon, and there is no version of the future beyond the unravelling of the day-to-day. The Dai are played by Dai, both local 'found' amateurs as well as professional extras, and while the script is an adaptation of a written text, the spoken text does not dominate the visual narration.

Yet it might also be argued that this is not straightforward, and in a sense the voiceover does continue to operate as a hegemonic interpretative device which serves Han perceptions to the detriment of the power of the visual narrative. Yet, as Rey Chow has pointed out in another context, this appetite for reform is immediately problematic as the authenticity of tradition comes into conflict with the perceived reality of contemporary content.

The detail is used as a point of enquiry into the conflictual affective structures that underlie approaches to 'history' in modern Chinese narratives. These approaches often appear as the concerted but contradictory preoccupations with 'liberation' and with national or ethnic 'unity'. Details are here defined as the sensuous, trivial and superfluous textual practices that exist in an ambiguous relation with some larger 'vision' such as reform or revolution.²⁰

In the case of *Sacrifice of Youth* this conflict flares up in the text in quite a complicated way. The authenticity of the Dai is insisted upon – their purity, political transparency, natural decency – a collective consciousness inspired not by an external ideal but grounded in the details of daily life. Yet part of that daily life is the awarding of workpoints in the collective, and the acceptance of city youth into

¹⁹ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics', p. 129.

²⁰ Rey Chow, 'Modernity and narration – in feminine detail', in *Women and Chinese Modernity* p. 85.

their communities. Furthermore it is their real (if I dare say that) traditions that are held up for criticism within the text. When a child is dying of fever, the mother's prayers are represented as shrill, and worse than useless. Li Chun cures him with medical skills cribbed from a Party textbook for barefoot doctors.

Yau has quoted Zhang saying that the 'Dai civilization [is] that which is primitive, sincere, befitting to human nature whilst the Han [is] that [which is] modern, partly hypocritical, and distorting to human nature'.²¹ Zhang claims that this tension is what turns Li Chun's life into tragedy. What she does not acknowledge however, is that it is her Han reading of both Han and Dai essential characteristics that is also responsible for Li Chun's reading of her own situation, which is what enables the narration of the story of the Han girl to achieve its self-reflexive poignancy. Li Chun is from the dominant culture but she has no home. Her relationships with the other Han in the area are informed by political awareness and by the drive to return to the public arena of political life which lies in the urban heartlands. Any desire to remain in the seeming paradise of *Such a Beautiful Place* is tempered by her understanding of the difference between the present and the future – and of course the determinations of the past.

Told in flashback, the film bears the ironic touch of the contemporary as Li Chun knows already how her life will change. She becomes a teacher, goes to university, and returns to see a wrecked Dai village where her Han friend – who never managed to leave – has perished in a landslide. Despite the insistence on Dai continuity, we do not see her village again after the burial of Ya, her adoptive Dai grandmother, several scenes earlier. It is as though the reality of her own contemporaneity is too painful to exist beside the continued paradise of that beautiful place. Moreover, without her there, it might start speaking for itself and the paradise might well peel away into just another contemporary tale of post Cultural Revolution confusion and discontent.

Zhang taught at the Beijing Film Academy and it was her writing in the late 1970s that called for a new film language. Her article of 1979,²² written in collaboration with the film critic Li Tuo, asked that film language be modernized so that the most modern and precocious of art forms, film, could achieve its potential in aesthetic form as well as in ideologically dictated reality, *xianshi*. The vision of reform has, in Zhang and Tuo's article at least, settled on the contrast between Chinese reality and western form. For them reform is not to be found in the silent voices of the Dai women but in the absorption of more distant cultural others into the Han vocabulary. It is easier to exploit the writings and productions of western critics and filmmakers than it is to allow the irruption of another traumatized illiteracy into their home territories.

The narrative in the film which demonstrates this most clearly is not that of Li Chun, but that of the Dai grandmother, Ya. Ya's narrative

²¹ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics', p. 129.

²² Li Tuo and Zhang Nuanxin, 'The modernization of film language', *Beijing Film Art*, no. 3 (1979).

falls within the 'main' narrative but also holds the narration together. She signifies timelessness, in that she marks place rather than plot development. Yet, as she spins or clacks her prayer beads, or rolls rice with her ancient stick-like arms, she is also the signifier of the relentless motion of domestic time, the inexorable passage from youth to age and from nurture to death.

For Ya is the authentic centre of *Sacrifice of Youth*. She hardly speaks, and yet it is her presence in the Dai house that ensures the continuity of the Dai life, at least in this story. She functions as the grounding signifier of *ziran* – naturalness. Although reinvented in the teens and twenties of this century by the May Fourth Movement,²³ the revolutionary intellectual school that pushed for the introduction of *putonghua*, modern vernacular Chinese, as a way of rejuvenating the language and its accessibility and republican possibilities – *ziran* has in fact long been a dominant trope in Chinese literature.²⁴ Daoist poets sought to create works that provided the form in which nature and authenticity might lodge themselves without being forced into the script or into the consciousness of the reader. Scholar-painters were taught to observe nature with their mind's eye, and then take their *knowingness* back into the studio, not their sketch pad. All they needed to do was look and practise their brush strokes. Once the form was perfected, and once their human spirit had made room for nature, and their inner eye could see what the painter had looked at, then the true essence of the tree, the mountain, the passive water would appear. Nature had to arrive *naturally*.

So Ya has to appear in the text as though the director is innocent of her presence, as though her representation has not been as carefully constructed as that of the main Han protagonist. Li Chun's memories are a selective representation of the internal recollections of Zhang and the writer of the original story. In contrast, Ya is playing herself, but she must do so within the boundaries of this narrated selection. Her part is not to recount her own life but to focus the spectators' (intra- and extra-diegetic) attention on purity and completeness, which is here accounted as authenticity. Ya's youth is shown in the singing and lovemaking of the Dai girls, and her 'typically Dai' fondness for beauty is apparent in her pleasure at Li Chun's self-transformation into a Dai. The girl makes herself a skirt from a curtain and piles her hair up on her head to simulate the Dai look. Ya smiles and fetches a silver belt which she fastens around Li Chun's waist. It is a maternal movement and a rite of female transference, and it is an acknowledgement of her own age. Ya's own beauty is noticed in the film's first shot of her when the camera travels up her arms to her bare shoulders and fragile gaze – which sees nothing except those whom she is called upon to love. Here Zhang's film is reminiscent of earlier ethnographic films where the beauty and sexuality of minority women, even if played by Han actresses, was acceptable, whereas Han femininity would be squeezed into an asexual stereotype. The 'natural'

²³ See, for example, the discussion of evocation *xing* as an antidote to the prosaic tendencies of early *putonghua* writings (some readers may prefer the term '*baihua*') in Zhang Zao, 'Development and continuity of modernity in Chinese poetry since 1917', in Wendy Larson and Wedell Wedellsborg (eds), *Inside Out, Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), pp. 38–59.

²⁴ For a discussion of the traditions and tropes of Chinese poetry see James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), esp. Part II. See also Chow's remarks on Buddhist texts, where Daoist *wuwei* (doing nothing) seems to have been incorporated. The acolyte must achieve the transmission of truth/natural content through a renunciation of over-determined form. Rey Chow, 'Ethics after idealism', *diacritics* (Spring 1993), p. 19.

'native' non-Han women had therefore functioned as a small sop to the frustrated voyeurism of the male – and female – Han audience. So as Li Chun discovers her (pre)sexual self through the permissiveness of the Dai, she is legitimized by Ya's approval and the gift of the silver belt. Apart from this 'natural' reaction to beauty, the only movement in Ya's story is that dictated by the departure of the Han girl, when her grief drives her to leave the house to look for Chun. Her health is impaired by the excursion and she dies.

Ya is both *not* Chinese, and therefore watchable, and yet within the territory of the Empire, and so fairly appropriated. This hardly-disguised voyeurism works through a discourse of nature and authenticity to complete the narcissistic self image of dominant Chinese-ness. It is within this relationship between narcissism and authenticity that the discourse of time is constructed. Ya's time is, quite literally, not her own. As she fastens Li Chun's belt, or prays as Li Chun's Dai brother and Han boyfriend fight over her beloved adoptive daughter, it is Li Chun's experience that is marked and charted. Even at her cremation, Ya signifies a conflagration that is neither her own nor her people's.

Esther Yau's scepticism made me look again at *Sacrifice of Youth*. She has extended what begins as a problem of feminism – whose, and at whose Other's cost? – and proceeds into a painful understanding of racism within the Chinese territories. Yau herself, however, also denies difference to those 'from' non-Chinese cultures. This is despite the fact that Yau's own voice slips between Han and a neutral Other as – being educated in western discourse – she is unable to stabilize it between the tug of theoretical critique and ethnic identity.

... one's efforts to acquire more knowledge about the Chinese people must also be limited, by the unassimilability of many parts of Chinese experience to Western liberal agendas (or conservative, or radical ones, for that matter), by the narcissistic nature of this kind of exploration, by the slippery nature of inter-cultural articulations, and then also, by the cultural difference within that entity called Chinese that have always been represented by the dominant Han culture. . . .

Yet, the lessons of colonialism have taught (her) (this writer, a Han Chinese woman) to realize that there also exist similarities and differences between China and other nation states . . . that is, when, at the end of an exploration of the dominant and 'minority' cultures within China, one encounters topographical features akin to one's own nation as regards the hegemony of dominant cultures. In this way reading the Other turns into a confrontation with the Self.²⁵

Yau begins by insisting on the impenetrability of the 'Chinese experience'. There are four reasons given for this. Firstly, the language of the political structuration of western life cannot accommodate a fair articulation of that of China. Secondly, any

²⁵ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics?', pp. 116–17.

attempt to penetrate the Chinese experience will from the outset be flawed by its narcissistic intent. Thirdly, attempts to make analyses and present descriptions of one culture from the point of view of another are likely to founder on misapprehensions. Finally, the tendency for the group 'Chinese' to be defined through the tropes and culture of the dominant Han people will always limit scholarly interpretations.

Her second point underlies the pessimism of the other three. She assumes that all crosscultural investigation, at least in the direction West-East, is informed by narcissistic fantasy. The object of study will always be Other and represented by those that are not of itself, because its difference is being used to fix other selves in other places. Given the history of such investigation, at least in Britain, this is fair comment. I do not have space to elaborate the case here, but Craig Clunas's work on the classification and exhibition of 'Oriental Antiquities' gives an excellent account of the appropriation of Chinese art forms by the museums of British fantasy.²⁶ Of course one could argue that *film* has no form at all without exhibition and so the scholar *must* participate in exhibition, either as a programmer, reviewer or critic. And, given the nature of film finance and the importance of international acclaim, at least in commercial terms, to any filmmaker looking for wide distribution, there may be a symbiosis across cultures – between artist and spectator – which is positive for both parties. The one is enabled to develop her/his work, the other finds that their narcissism is tempered by a knowledge of the industrial conditions of its satisfaction.

A response to Yau's contention might be that 'efforts to acquire more knowledge' may come from many different positions within the West. The academic or other discourses in which critics, reviewers and scholars frame their questions and into which they translate their answers will be more or less reflexive to problems one, three and four in Yau's list. If an impenetrable difference is still claimed, does the argument not then seem to turn to a discourse of race and biology, ('this writer, a Han Chinese woman')? Exclusion from knowledge on the grounds of race casts anyone who is in a position that is not comfortable within the structures of domination into a stupor of silent respect.

As Yau continues, however, her position changes. She moves from an apparently neutral position, from where she has commented on the inherent problems of cross-cultural interrogation. Now her identity, her identity as Han Chinese rather than her identity as Han Chinese trained in methods of western analysis and writing in English, allows her to recognize China in a new guise. She sees the nation, her 'own nation', as a colonizer within its own territory, 'an exploration of the dominant and 'minority' cultures *within* China' (emphasis mine). At this point she accepts China's hegemony as territorially accurate whilst questioning its attributions of dominant or minority status. As she

²⁶ Craig Clunas, 'Oriental antiquities/Far Eastern art', in *positions* vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 318–55.

writes, the Other has become the Self. Is this significantly more useful than the presumed narcissistic confirmation through the Other which is seen to define the insights of those who cannot claim Han nationality? In both/all cases there are contradictions within the identity of the enquirer. The information and tensions that are inherent within these identities will both illuminate and confuse the enquiry. In this case it would seem that the more enquirers the better.

No time but the present

I am arguing that in the Chinese cinema of the 1980s, time is up for grabs. Tradition is conflated with ideals of communist organization, such as the rural idylls of collective farming. Authenticity is prized as a way of fixing the past so that the narcissistic self can seize moments of history as its own. These moments are continually brought forward into the present to set up a contemporary mode. To live outside this is to be, at the least, different and, at the extreme, mad. The narcissist, or the narcissistic state, may move powerfully into the future on entirely its own terms.

In *Yellow Earth* this mechanism is turned against itself to devastating ironic effect. The film reclaims the contemporary moment on behalf of the fifth generation, the returned youth of the Cultural Revolution. In Chow's model of postcolonial time, *Yellow Earth* is a postmodern text. And it is a postmodern text constructed as a way of opening up an entry into the subjectivity of the modern. It is periodization rather than notions of time itself that has to be understood in a specifically non-western context. In China, modernity has only now caught up with itself after the hiatus of Liberation. In *Yellow Earth* the conflict between tradition, revolution and modernity, underlaid by the memory of resistance to external hostility and internal oppression, informs what is, on the surface, a simple narrative. It is 1938, the Communist forces are holed up in Yan'an, gathering strength four years after the Long March. A soldier, Gu Qing, has been sent North to gather songs from the peasants, much as the Emperor's emissaries went out to gather the *Songs of Ch'u* three thousand years before. Gu Qing stays with a small family, a widower and his two children, the girl Cuiqiao and the boy Hanhan. Gu Qing's optimism infects the children who both express their wish to join him and his revolution. However, Cuiqiao drowns in her attempt to escape across the Yellow River, and Hanhan cannot fight his way through a sea of praying peasants when the soldier returns after a fateful absence.

In one short scene, the girl peasant Cuiqiao is asking the Communist soldier Gu Qing to take her with him to join the army.²⁷ The soldier refuses, saying that he must first get permission from his superior officer, but that he will return for her in the Spring. Cuiqiao

27 The full script can be found in Bonnie MacDougall's account of the film. Her subtitles have unfortunately been removed from the current print of the film, but the original (which contains quite substantial differences) can be seen at the British Film Institute, London. Bonnie MacDougall, *The Yellow Earth: a Film by Chen Kaige with a Complete Translation of the Film Script* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991).

28 For a discussion of the socialist realist gaze see my article (then Stephanie Hemelryk), 'The Chinese horizon and the socialist realist gaze' in *diatribe* (Winter 94–5), published by the Centre for the Study of Language and Cultural Theory, University of Southampton.

29 See Zheng Dongtian, 'Starting from the Loess Plateau', *China Screen*, vol. 1 (1985), pp. 12–13. The review, which was only published after the film had received acclaim at the Hong Kong Film Festival in October 1984, ignores any possibly subversive textual ironies, and markets the film as a paean to the national character and the Chinese sense of the Earth as its mentor.

30 For an account of the move into a new economic philosophy see David Wen Wei-Chang, *China Under Deng Xiao Ping: Political and Economic Reform* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Books, 1988). Jiang's inspiration may have come from Deng Xiao Ping's speech to a Japanese delegation on 30 June 1984: 'Build socialism with Chinese characteristics', in *Speeches and Writings of Deng Xiao Ping* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), pp. 95–8.

31 Esther Yau, 'Yellow Earth: western analysis and a non-western text', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1987–8), pp. 22–33.

32 Rey Chow, 'Silent is the ancient plain: music, film-making and the conception of reform in China's new cinema', *Discourse* vol. 12, no. 2 (1990), pp. 82–109. For a brief example of how the religions of China synthesized under certain circumstances see: Max Loehr, *The Great Painters of China* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), p. 228.

sighs, knowing that she is to be married off in April and that the soldier is unlikely to return in time to save her from this traditional fate. The clip ends with the soldier looking into the heroic Communist future, signalling to the audience that this moment, 1938, is the cusp of history. If we look to him as the personification of the ideal future we will collaborate in this socialist realist gaze²⁸ and our identities will merge with the ungendered revolutionary present. All will be well. So Cuiqiao looks down and then up into the soldier's face, but as she moves away she sings a song bewailing her destiny in which she sees nothing but nostalgia for a future that never came to pass.

The soldier is the revolution, Cuiqiao is the victim of tradition: traditions which dictate village mores, and which constrain the soldier to go back and ask permission for her to join the movement. It is also, perhaps, tradition that confines her to articulating the misery of her condition through bitter songs (*kuger*) rather than through a direct heart to heart with the soldier himself. Added to this, the modern gaze will insert yet more conflict into this exemplary moment of history. For Chen Kaige knows that the audience of 1984 will not collude with the soldier's gaze into the horizon.²⁹ They have already lived through his horizon and are on their way, to another: 'Socialist Capitalism with Chinese characteristics'³⁰ as President Jiang Zemin has termed it.

Cuiqiao, the archetypal poor peasant, is the nostalgic backbone of the Chinese Communist Party's success, but here she is torn between faith and fatalism. Modernity – through the eye of Chen Kaige's direction and Zhang Yimou's camera – is casting a look of ironic disbelief on the soldier, a contemporary shrug which the audience imitate as they fail to follow his gaze offscreen. The soldier has come too early for Cuiqiao and too late for 1984. Yet Cuiqiao is not written into the present either. She is operating in the film as the authentic anchor of Chinese suffering. When she drowns she is singing the song the soldier has taught her. In one way, she has a heroic, revolutionary death, in another, a traditional end for the unconventional woman, singing new words to an old tune.

You has argued that *Yellow Earth's* aesthetic success is partly due to the use of Taoist discontinuity to disrupt the narrative flow, and presumably to thus allow the insertion of readership and modern reflexivity into the text.³¹ In this reading, Taoist silences are responsible for the subversive possibilities of the film and the breaks fracture the expected rendition of 1938 into a landscape of relentless natural harshness and tiny isolated human stories that cannot quite connect with each other. Chow, on the other hand, has made the counter-argument that Taoism has always been complicit in the patriarchy of Confucian traditions – acting as a spiritual excuse for feminine passivity – and that the Taoist silences in *Yellow Earth* actually preserve the patriarchal narration of the film in moments of inarticulacy and make it seem natural.³²

I would add that these perspectives are not contradictory, that the

subversion in the film's silence is aimed not at patriarchy, but at the smaller target of socialist realism. The film ironizes the collective gaze into an ideal future, but sets up a new collective narcissism where history – and women as objects of fantasy within that history – are targeted for appropriation by the contemporary modern Chinese male. Cuiqiao has been the first of a string of suicidal women in Fifth Generation films.

Concluding in crisis

I began this article worrying that my lack of authenticity precluded me from comment. I feared charges of Orientalism, but I hated the prospect of silence. Having not been in the least bit silent, I conclude that a positive sense of the inauthentic is the necessary condition of both critic and artist. Fighting over one's own or someone else's authenticity is a fight to the last second of recorded time. It is the control of history; of the relationship between one moment and another, that determines a *planned authenticity* for the losers.

The crisis of Tiananmen and the resulting clampdowns on cultural production can be, then, partly understood as a crisis in time. The historical stasis arduously created and preserved since Liberation clashed with a sudden surge of contemporary reaction. This had surely happened before, but where political will had before been dominant in all possible spheres of shared experience – economic, social, domestic, – now the economy had acquired its own logic through the admission of market reforms. The synchronous time of perpetual revolution had not been replaced, or at least not in the minds and political will of the Chinese government, but it was now in competition with the forward thrusting of chronological modernity.

In the years after Liberation, the idealism of a perfected future was the nostalgic beam that created a kind of suspension of everyday contemporaneity. For, although nostalgia is represented as a yearning backwards glance, it in fact is a longing for a future perfect. When the narcissistic Self goes looking for the authentic, it is searching for something that has never existed, and it is hunting a memory of something it wished it could have been.

Authenticity as a need to rely on 'undisputed origin' is prey to an obsessive fear: that of losing a connection. Everything must hold together . . . a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling.³³

This search for authenticity is acute in the Chinese context of post ideology. The identities forged to control various segments of the population are now being reappropriated; and, as I have argued, both Chinese and western modernity involve the invention of the authentic.

³³ Minh-Ha, 'Difference', p. 27.

Primal scenes and the female gothic: *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*

JOHN FLETCHER

The search for origins, especially when it takes the form of reconstructing a hidden or forbidden scene, is one of the most seductive of all narratives. The return to such a scene, its unveiling or reconstruction, in the hope of retrieving the vanished passage of violence or desire, is at the heart of both psychoanalysis and narrative cinema. This shared retrospective epistemophilia can be located in at least two figures: first, the psychoanalytic figure of the excluded infant, eavesdropping on the parental couple and their night-time activities – the Freudian primal scene; and second, the cinematic figure of the transfixed, paranoid investigator, specified variously in the system of Hollywood genres as the detective, lawman or private eye, the amnesiac protagonist of the flashback melodrama, the anxious wife of the domestic Gothic, among others. If psychoanalysis, elaborating its concepts through the figures of Narcissus, Oedipus, de Sade and von Sacher-Masoch, is involved in a prolonged love affair with literature, as Maud Ellmann has suggested, then it is also clear that Hollywood cinema, and especially the melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s, was in love with psychoanalysis.¹

Over the last decade or so the psychoanalytic semiotics of cinema has shifted its concerns from the closed system models of the 1970s to a concern with the question of fantasy. The emphasis here is not so much on the act of looking as a separate and determining instance, the continual refixing of the viewing subject in the scopic regimes of voyeurism and fetishism (as in the early work of Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath and French apparatus theory), but on fantasy as the *mise en scene* of the stories of desire, identity and death. The

1 Maud Ellmann, 'Blanche', in Jeremy Hawthorn (ed.), *Criticism and Critical Theory* (London: Arnold, 1984), p. 99.

theatrical notion of *mise en scene* is not to be understood as the pure spatializing of the wish-to-see, as in a spectacle or tableau. Rather, it presents a more dynamic sequencing of the wish-to-see as a narrative movement. The word 'scenario', with its double reference to both story and scene, is more apt a word. It suggests, in the literal meaning of the French phrase, a *putting into scenic form* of a temporal narrative drive, its condensation into a layout that tells a tale of before and after, that hints at an absent or unrepresentable drama; but one which leaves its traces and clues within the manifest scenario that comes to assume a vivid even fixating power, like a Freudian screen memory.²

In their classic essay 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality',³ the French psychoanalysts Laplanche and Pontalis designate fantasy as the fundamental object of psychoanalysis. They argue that it is through the organizing scenarios of what Freud called the primal fantasies that psychic life is formed and sexuality structured. The very emergence of a psychic and sexual order from the biological organism with its pre-given needs and instincts takes place through a double relation of derivation and deviation,⁴ of the psychic drive (*trieb*) from the biological instinct (*instinkt*) in an original perversion or turning around and away from the biological order of needs.⁵ This double relation between instinct and drive is a primordial signifying relation marked by the play of metaphor and metonymy. Here sexuality comes to exist as such through the intervention of fantasy, that is, through a metaphorization of instinctual aims (physical digestion is doubled as mental or psychic incorporation) and a metonymic displacement of the instinctual object (the mother's milk as the object of the feeding instinct is displaced by the erotically charged image of the maternal breast with which it is contiguously associated). Laplanche and Pontalis speak of:

the moment when sexuality, disengaged from any natural object, moves into the field of fantasy and by that fact becomes sexuality. . . . But one could equally state the inverse proposition that it is the breaking in of fantasy which occasions the disjunction of sexuality and need.⁶

They insist on a fantasmatic inscription and autoerotic organization of the field of the sexual and its polymorphous perverse drives before any formation of the ego or unification of the libido in the narcissistic mirror relations of the Imaginary as described by Lacan. Like Sartre's famous existentialist maxim 'existence precedes essence', one could summarize them as saying 'fantasy precedes identity'. Hence, in their most radical proposition they argue:

Fantasy, however, is not the object of desire, but its setting [i.e. its *mise en scene*]. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object but is himself

- 2 Sigmund Freud, 'Screen memories' (1899), in J. Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. III (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), pp. 301–22; *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ch. IV, S.E., vol. VI, pp. 43–52.
- 3 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality' (1964), in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 5–34.
- 4 In Laplanche's late theory of the enigmatic signifier, the sexual drives are not the result of a spontaneous autogenesis from the instincts, but the untranslated remainder of an unconscious process of parental implantation and infantile translation and binding. See J. Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1987), trans. D. Macey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
- 5 Strachey's translation of Freud's *trieb* as instinct loses the distinction in Freud's German, opening the way terminologically for the biologization of the psychic drive. See the entries in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967), trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), especially pp. 214–16.
- 6 Laplanche and Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality', p. 25.

represented as participating in the scene, although, in the earliest forms of fantasy he cannot be assigned a fixed place in it . . . the subject although always present in the fantasy may be so in a de-subjectivised form . . . in the very syntax of the sequence in question.⁷

Fantasy, then, is the very matrix of desire and identity. It is prior to any relation between a witness and a rememberable external scene. The positioning of the subject is the effect of a desiring movement in and through the terms and images of fantasy: a desiring movement that stages and restages the fantasizing subject. The human subject is constituted and given substance through its fantasies.

Fantasy in this perspective is characterized by a distinctive combination of fixity and mobility. The primal fantasies described by Freud form a triptych of scenes: the father's threatened castration of the son; the father's seduction of the daughter; attendant pieces on either side, so to speak, of what comes to be nominated classically as *the primal scene*, the father's assault on or violent possession of the mother. Dominated by the figure of the aggressive, phallic father, this patrocentric fantasmatic, as I have argued elsewhere, maps a family structure whose imaginary positions – castrated son, seduced daughter, possessed mother – are established in relation to the imago of the father.⁸ Discussing the seduction scenario which they summarize as 'a father seduces a daughter', Laplanche and Pontalis comment on 'the peculiar character of the structure, in that it is a scenario with multiple entries, in which nothing shows whether the subject will be immediately located as *daughter*; it can as well be fixed as *father*, or even in the term *seduces*'.⁹ This dispersal of the fantasizing subject through the syntax or sequence of an imaginary scenario, its localization within an act or pattern of action within a scene, prior to the taking up of stable subject positions within that scene in the form of secondary identifications, is one of the main attractions of this work for film theory. For if the primal fantasies map the terrain of a phallogocentric Oedipal order, they do so without necessarily determining the positioning and investments of the fantasizing subject along pre-given gender lines, in advance of the specific narrative articulation of particular scenes and sequences. This challenges the functionalist tendency of much 1970s apparatus theory, a tendency to constitute a deterministic metapsychology of the cinema apparatus, based on the hypostatization of the gaze as male, and in which narrative is merely a secondary repetition or elaboration of the given metapsychological terms.

If the primal fantasies stage the *mise en scene* of the Oedipus complex, with the fantasies of the daughter's seduction and the son's threatened castration (and resultant paternal identification) marking the moment of the normalizing, positive complex for each sex, then what they leave out is as important as what they include – direct relations

8 John Fletcher, 'Poetry, gender and primal fantasy', in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, pp. 109–41; 'Freud and his uses: psychoanalysis and gay theory', in Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis (eds), *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 90–118.

9 Ibid., pp. 22–3.

between mother and infant, the field of pre-Oedipal fantasy which they exclude precisely so as to transform. The supposedly 'primal' fantasies, primal because they are, in the words of Laplanche and Pontalis, subjective myths of origins, can be read as a form of secondary revision, a rescripting of that earlier organization of wishes and identifications bound to the maternal imago, a revision that stages itself as a fantasy of paternal origins. The scenarios generated by the primal fantasies are, then, palimpsests, multi-layered scenes or inscriptions, in which the culturally preferred and enforced positions and identifications are underwritten, in both senses of the word, that is, supported but also potentially destabilized as only one possible permutation of the received scenes and figures. Joan Riviere's classical 1929 essay, 'Womanliness as masquerade', gives an exemplary instance of such a palimpsestic scenario in which the daughter's assumption of the position of object of male desire in an anxious masquerade of ultra-femininity – in Lacan's terms, being-the-phallus-for-the-man rather than having it for herself – is underwritten by a transgressive seizure of phallic prerogatives from both the phallic mother and the Oedipal father. Here the purloined phallus represents both Lacan's signifier of desire, and what Riviere calls the paternal talisman, 'the invincible sword, the "organ of sadism"', possession of which licenses the retention of infantile sadism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as masquerade', reprinted in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, pp. 35–44.

The female gothic

Both Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (Selznick/United Artists, US, 1940) and George Cukor's *Gaslight* (MGM, US, 1944) turn on what might be called primal scenes in an extended sense – they present an intrusion into a space which has been the scene of a desiring and/or murderous action in the past. This scene is speculated upon, imagined, remembered; it is not represented by the film directly but is present in its traces, which are encrypted or embalmed in a sealed, preserved room – Rebecca's bedroom, Alice Alquist's drawing-room. As both films are premised on a version of the Freudian primal scene itself – the killing of Rebecca by her husband, Maxim de Winter, the murder of the opera singer, Alice Alquist, by her former accompanist, Sergius Bower – traumatic scenes both films rehearse verbally but cannot represent cinematically, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the scenes, the rooms, that are represented bear testimony to scenes even earlier, than those classically nominated as 'primal'. These pre-primal scenes – pre-originary ur-scenes – are 'the other scene' of the primal scene (to borrow Freud's designation of the Unconscious as *die andere Schauplatz*): the scene before or behind the scene of paternal origins, its reverse or other side which the primal scene attempts to rewrite or cancel out. These scenes turn on a figure who is

11 For a discussion of the vicissitudes of Riviere's term in film theory, see John Fletcher, 'Versions of masquerade', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1988), pp. 43–70.

12 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury: observations on the family melodrama' (1972); Mary Ann Doane, 'The "woman's film": possession and address' (1984); both reprinted in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987). For an extensive consideration of the woman's film, the 'Freudian feminist melodrama' and their relation to Gothic, see also Andrew Britton, 'A new servitude: Bette Davis, *Now Voyager* and the radicalism of the Woman's Film', in *Cineaste*, vol. 26/27 (1992), especially pp. 35–49.

13 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the 19th Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

undecidably ambiguous, being simultaneously the Mistress or possessor of the House and the phallic usurper; in other words, they entail variations on Riviere's problematic of the masquerade.¹¹

Both films belong to the cycle of 1940s women's films that began with Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, and have been variously labelled 'the Freudian feminist melodrama' (by Thomas Elsaesser) or 'the paranoid woman's film' (by Mary Ann Doane).¹² They include Litvak's *All This and Heaven Too* (Warner, US, 1940), Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (RKO, US, 1941), Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (RKO, US, 1943) and *Experiment Perilous* (RKO, US, 1944), Minnelli's *Undercurrent* (MGM, US, 1946), Mankiewicz's *Dragonwyck* (20th Century Fox, US, 1946), Sirk's *Sleep My Love* (United Artists, US, 1947), Godfrey's *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (Warner, US, 1947), Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (Universal/Diana, US, 1948), Ophuls's *Caught* (Enterprise/MGM, US, 1948). It is perhaps more helpful to think of them as examples of the female Gothic, for the narrative and symbolic paradigms that structure them are taken from the tradition of female Gothic writing that in the 1790s received a distinctive form with Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a tradition concerned with the disempowerment of the woman within patriarchal dynastic structures, represented as incarceration within a feudal castle or abbey of the *ancien régime*. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) precipitates the key elements of this tradition in a new and definitive form by adding to the motif of the woman trapped in the Gothic House the figure of the Byronic hero as Master of the House and object of the heroine's desire. The dark and brooding figure of the Byronic formula is not simply a repetition of the scheming and imprisoning Gothic villain, the Montonis and Schedonis of earlier texts, but a symbolic heir of that literary *Urvater* of the demonic, Milton's Satan, the rebellious aristocrat and fallen Son of Heaven. As Gilbert and Gubar have argued, what attracts the female protagonist to the Byronic hero is his anguish, his discontent, his air of bearing, behind those dark-browed, craggy features, a tantalizing secret, in the words not of Gilbert and Gubar but of Gilbert and Sullivan (from *Patience* [1881]). 'And who is this, whose manly face bears sorrow's interesting trace?'¹³ His sorrow is usually the interesting trace of a crime, variously incest, adultery or murder, for the Byronic hero who is Master of the House and apparently the very embodiment of patriarchal law and authority is in fact a secret transgressor of that law. In a formula, the Byronic hero – from Milton's Satan to Byron's Manfred, the Brontës' Heathcliff and Rochester, and Stoker's Dracula – is the Oedipal rebel. His brooding anguish speaks to the restlessness and discontent of the heroine, and holds out to her the tempting fantasy of rescue, of redeeming the secretly wounded and grieving Master of the House from his dark past, of uncovering his secret and making him whole again, and, of course, making herself indispensable. It only takes the stroke of genius by which Brontë

triangulates the narrative, splitting the female figure into two, for the elements of the female Oedipal drama to fall compellingly into place. This creates an uncanny and doubling relation between the youthful protagonist and the older woman, the first wife and previous possessor of both the House and its Master, who haunts the narrative as the Madwoman in the Attic or the Mummy in the Cellar or the body at the bottom of the sea. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) is a 1930s rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, and it is through a cinematic transposition of du Maurier's novel that the female Gothic with its Oedipal paradigm decisively enters into combination with the emergent conventions of the Hollywood woman's film.

It was Raymond Durnat who first remarked on the Oedipal logic of *Rebecca*, and Tania Modleski who developed an analysis of the film in terms of the feminine Oedipal trajectory. In doing so, she sought to modify the influential view, presented by Laura Mulvey in her now classic 1975 *Screen* essay and elaborated at length by film theorists such as Stephen Heath and Raymond Bellour, of Hollywood cinema as a psychic and representational machine that continuously recycled and resecured the terms of a phallic identity for a male or masculinized spectator. This construction of Hollywood cinema as what Constance Penley has called 'the bachelor machine', entails the continual replaying of castration anxieties and the trajectory of the male Oedipus: rebellion, submission and identification with the paternal law and its gaze, together with the punishment, neutralization or fetishizing of the threatening woman.¹⁴

By contrast, in Durnat's suggestive summary of *Rebecca*: 'The heroine fulfils the archetypal female Oedipal dream of marrying the father-figure, who has rescued her from the tyranny of the domineering older woman. But in doing so she has to confront the rival from the past, the older woman who possessed her father first, who can reach out and possess him once again.'¹⁵ Something of this relation of fascination, intimidation, rivalry and substitution between Maxim de Winter's first and second wives is manifested in a notorious oddity of the narrative: Rebecca, who haunts the film that is named after her, leaving her monogrammed initial *R* throughout the house on numerous objects as the sign of her possession and trace of her presence, is never shown by the film. Rebecca is a name without a body, while the female protagonist (played by Joan Fontaine), who is the spectator's chief point of narrative identification for the first three quarters of the film, is never named in her own right. She is a body without, or in search of, a name. Her plight finds an uncanny echo in the pathos that attaches to the description of the anonymous woman whose body has been deliberately misidentified by Maxim and substituted for Rebecca in the family grave: 'The body of an unknown woman, unclaimed, belonging nowhere'.

On her first day at Manderley, the de Winters' ancestral seat, sitting at Rebecca's desk in the morning room, oppressed by the insistence of

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18. Constance Penley, 'Feminism, film theory and the bachelor machine', *m/f*, no. 10 (1985), p. 39. See also Joan Copjec, 'The anxiety of the influencing machine', *October*, no. 23 (Winter, 1982), pp. 43–59.

¹⁵ Quoted in Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Film Theory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 46.

the maternal signifier *R* on everything she touches, Fontaine finds herself involuntarily replying to the first telephone call of her married life: 'Mrs de Winter? Oh, I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Mrs de Winter has been dead for over a year.' She begins by failing to recognize herself in the title, Mrs de Winter, so strong is her sense that the house, its possessions and her husband still belong to the dead, but as yet unvanquished, Rebecca. At the close of the famous sequence in Rebecca's bedroom, she retreats back to the morning room, bundles Rebecca's monogrammed address book and notepaper together, and summons Mrs Danvers the housekeeper to take them away. In the face of Mrs Danvers's protest that 'These are Mrs de Winter's things!' she asserts, 'I am Mrs de Winter now!' Momentarily she seizes as hers the Name of the Father, 'de Winter', from her ghostly rival, reversing her earlier self-abnegation. However, her moment of triumph is a pyrrhic victory as the debacle of the masquerade ball makes clear. Masquerading at Mrs Danvers's suggestion as Lady Caroline de Winter, Maxim's ancestress in one of the family portraits, she learns from her husband's horrified and violent response that there is a difference between bearing the name de Winter in fantasy or reality, and being the object of his desire.

Ed Gallafent, in his discussion of fantasy in *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*, argues against the tendency of previous commentary on the cycle to 'assign fantasy (imagination, fear) to the wife and realised purpose (design, plan) to the husband' and for consideration of the fantasy life of the male figure as part of the film's construction of the couple: 'In an awareness of melodrama's rich connection with horror, I want to reconsider the category [Doane's 'paranoid woman's film'] as the 'paranoid couple's film', examining their exchange of fantasies, their attribution of fantasies to each other, their fantasies of each other's fantasies.'¹⁶ Here I want to argue, following Laplanche and Pontalis, that the production of fantasy as a terrain of action, a *mise en scene*, is prior to, and includes, the various subject positions from which the fantasy may at any point be spoken and inflected differently, and through which it circulates. Rather than attribute fantasy only to the film's characters, while in Gallafent's terms assigning to the film 'realised purpose (design, plan)', I want to consider the filmwork, like Freud's dreamwork and jokework, as a fantasmatic production that sets up a scene and a narrative involving various figures and positions within which the spectator, the film's fantasizing subject, is invited to find 'herself' through the film's work of enunciation, of cinematic identification and disidentification. Particular characters come to figure particular positions on this fantasmatic circuit, and not always the same ones (Fontaine's movement from *jeune fille* to black satin, pearls and a symbolic 'thirty-six years old' is a crucial part of the film's fantasy-work).

The fantasy of the older, sexually experienced and powerful woman represented through the unrepresented, disembodied Rebecca, is

¹⁶ Ed Gallafent, 'Black satin: fantasy, murder and the couple in *Gaslight* and *Rebecca*', *Screen*, vol. 3 (1988), p. 84.

enunciated variously in the film from different positions: Fontaine's employer Mrs van Hopper, who first introduces her to the 'Rebecca' myth; Mrs Danvers the housekeeper, and Rebecca's delegate in the film; the Fontaine character herself; Frank Crawley, the smitten estate manager; Jack Favell, Rebecca's 'favourite cousin'; and, of course, her husband Maxim de Winter. It is the narrative's strategy to appear to attribute this fantasy through the incomprehension of his young second wife (who along with the spectator is the fantasy's real subject) to Maxim, whose actual role is to figure in the fantasy as the grieving and obsessed widower and so to sustain it for others. It is Maxim, however, who decisively rewrites and repositions the figure and fantasy of Rebecca in his retrospective narrative of Rebecca's marital transgression and murderous punishment. (The film softens the killing into a blow that accidentally leads to her death, whereas in the novel it is a straightforward shooting. Given the exigencies of the Hayes code, Maxim could not be shown to commit murder and survive through to a happy ending.)

Rebecca as fantasy: the phallic woman

The long sequence in Rebecca's bedroom dramatizes the sexual mysteries of the experienced older woman, localizing the fantasy of the phallic mother in her very absence through the elaboration of a particular mise en scene. Its peculiar power in the film is partly due to the way it is played out between two women, Mrs Danvers the housekeeper and the Fontaine character, with only an imaginary reference to the absent male. From her first arrival at Manderley, Rebecca's room is signalled as central to the imaginative terrain of the de Winter estate – only the West wing has views that sweep down to the sea where Rebecca was drowned, while the new wife is located in the previously unused East wing – but it is closed and out of bounds. Fontaine's decision to broach those mysteries and to explore Rebecca's room is provoked by the visit of Jack Favell (George Sanders), Rebecca's lover, whose secret meeting with Mrs Danvers in Rebecca's room Fontaine has noticed, and who announces insinuatingly to Fontaine: 'I was Rebecca's favourite cousin'. Fontaine flinches with shock, turns to the mysterious Mrs Danvers only to find she has silently vanished, and heads as if instinctively up the grand staircase in response to Favell's provocation (a provocation that is absent in the novel), to explore the site where the dead woman and her secrets seem still to have an uncanny afterlife.

The sequence begins with two prolonged shots: first, a retreating camera movement ahead of Fontaine's wary approach to the doors of Rebecca's room; and second, a forward-moving zoom in on the keyhole and knobs of the closed doors. Cutting from Fontaine's fascinated gaze into camera in the first shot, the second seems initially

like a subjective shot from her point of view. This is contradicted, however, by the emergence of Fontaine's *right* hand from left of camera which decentres the zoom shot (her *left* hand would have confirmed and centred it as her point of view). The subject of the zoom shot turns out retrospectively to be the spectator, directly solicited by the camera to assume the position of the voyeur at the keyhole in what is a classic Hitchcockian signature effect. Both shots elongate the moment of approach, drawing it out in slow motion so as to make it anxious, suspenseful and guilty. The famous voiceover dream sequence that begins the film – 'Last night I dreamed that I went to Manderley again' – marks an identical moment of exclusion and access – 'For a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me . . . then like all dreamers, I was possessed of magical powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me'. A similar effect of magically empowered trespass is produced in Fontaine's approach to Rebecca's room by the soundtrack and the signifying work of its music. For above the held, quavering chords indicating suspense is superimposed the stealthy tiptoe ascent of the treble scales, rendering musically the footsteps we do not see, and overcoming musically the sense of exclusion and taboo that the camera's sustained focus on the closed doors has created, like the padlocked gates at the beginning of the film. The obstacle on the imagetrack is overcome on the soundtrack. Fontaine's hand appears from left of camera and the door swings open on the sound of a gong as Fontaine enters to the modulations of what sounds like an oboe. Together with the half-light of the room and the expanse of semi-transparent curtains, the music creates the sense of an enclosed, exotic, almost submarine environment that is magically opening itself up at a touch to exploration. Fontaine's progress across the room to the window is marked by the parting of veils and drawing of curtains, accompanied by sudden upward runs and treble crescendos over an organ continuo that combines exoticism with religious connotations.

In the course of her circling movement through the room, Fontaine is brought up short by Maxim's framed photograph on Rebecca's dressing table, which she responds to with a wincing, wounded movement. If the unseen Rebecca is positioned in the narrative in relation to Maxim, as his wife the first Mrs de Winter, in this scene Maxim principally figures as just one of her inventory of objects, tokens and totems that seem to testify to a sexual mystery that overflows any one of its signifiers. The Master of Manderley now appears as just one of the possessions of its former Mistress. The slamming of the window and the sudden appearance of Mrs Danvers punctuate Fontaine's characteristic relation to the house: she is forever being startled from behind, taken by surprise, by Favell, the servants or Mrs Danvers, who materializes in the bedroom without sound or apparent movement, as the blackclad presiding priestess at the shrine of the sexual mysteries of Rebecca. She catches out the cringing,

guilt-ridden Fontaine in a lie about the open window, corrects and humiliates her like a child caught trespassing and proceeds to the full ritual unveiling of the room's secrets.

Mrs Danvers's drawing of the second set of curtains is celebrated on the soundtrack by another swelling crescendo, and transforms the room into a light-filled cathedral with tall clerestory-like windows, revealing the dressing-table as a high altar with candlesticks and Maxim's photograph as accessories to the ornately framed mirror. It is like a tabernacle, marking the place of the absent image of Rebecca that would once have filled it. This sacralizing of the woman's sexuality is taken to comic lengths when we are informed that Rebecca's underwear was made for her by the nuns at the convent of St Clare. The successive stages of the ritual initiation of Fontaine as the neophyte centre on moments of imagined eroticized contact with substitutes for Rebecca's body that are exchanged between the two women: the luxurious fur coat whose sleeve is first brushed against the face of Mrs Danvers and then against the face of Fontaine: 'Feel this! – it was an Xmas present from Mr de Winter. He was always giving her expensive presents'; and of course the climactic moment with the negligee. Mrs Danvers's commentary on the room and its objects turns into an imaginary re-enactment of the intimacies of Rebecca's toilette with its bathing and hair-drill, while Fontaine is presented as virtually infantilized by the sequence. In the previous scene, Favell mockingly refers to her as Cinderella, and in the scene afterwards, Maxim likens her to Alice in Wonderland with her ribbon. Here also she is wonderstruck, fearful, stricken with the sense of her own inadequacy as she is drawn into Mrs Danvers's repetition of the past; beckoned to, ordered about, she is never more childlike and



Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson)
seats Fontaine in the place of
Rebecca. Picture courtesy:
BFI Stills / United
International Pictures

desexualized than when, with her Alice-band and her short-sleeved, buttoned-up blouse, she is made to stand or sit in the place of Rebecca. Mrs Danvers does this to her again in the masquerade ball sequence, tricking her into wearing Rebecca's costume, and so putting her into Rebecca's place to punish her by demonstrating how little she can fill that place. No one can occupy the intensely imagined place of the older woman.

The sequence's boldest tactic in dramatizing the fantasy of the all-desired and all-possessing phallic woman comes in the moment with the negligee. Transfixed by her husband's photograph on Rebecca's dressing-table, Fontaine hears Mrs Danvers intone: 'Then she would say "Good-night Danny" and step into her bed'. Fontaine is then beckoned to witness the unimaginable scene hinted at by the chain of metonymic connections – Maxim's photograph, Rebecca in bed, the transparent black negligee so tantalizingly displayed to the reluctant Fontaine: 'Look! You can see my hand in it!' The sexual metonymy of the hand in the negligee marks the imagined presence of the absent body. It seems to overrun or to exceed the relations that might contain it. For the whole sequence also seems in excess of anything that might accrue to Maxim as the possessor or Master of the House, the room, the woman and her sexual favours and secrets. The proliferation around Rebecca of possessions, objects, lovers seems witness to a self-pleasuring luxury whose objects are only ever expendable and accessory; as if the phallic woman were narcissistically complete in herself, both sexual subject and object, subordinating the man to a sexual exchange in which his presence and his gifts are merely part of the apparatus, the props for the display of the woman's desirability and power. It empties Fontaine's relation to Maxim of significance by contrast with Rebecca as the imagined object of Maxim's most intense desires and investments: his photograph, his lavish presents, his place in the bed as the privileged partner of the woman in the negligee.

The musical crescendo that marks Fontaine's recoil and withdrawal from the hand in the negligee also marks her grief and exclusion from the imaginary sexual scene memorialized in Rebecca's bedroom, which the film can never show. Fontaine takes up neither the position of the male fetishist or voyeur reposing in the controlled displacement of the desired body into its accessories, nor the position of Mrs Danvers whose projective identification with the all-powerful Mistress of the House cancels her own sexuality in a gesture that cedes it to the figure she serves. The final exchange between the two women appears to induce in Fontaine the classic paranoid position, as Mrs Danvers whispers: 'Do you think the dead come back and watch the living? . . . Sometimes I wonder if she doesn't come back here to Manderley and watch you and Mr de Winter together.' In Freud's case of female paranoia, the woman making love with her male colleague hears the click of a camera of a hidden photographer, and imagines it is

Mrs Danvers threatens
Fontaine with the return of
Rebecca. Picture courtesy: BFI
Stills / United International
Pictures



- 17 Sigmund Freud, 'A case of
paranoia running counter to the
psychoanalytic theory of the
disease' (1915), reprinted in A.
Richards (ed.). *On*
Psychopathology, Pelican Freud
Library, vol. 10 (Harmondsworth
Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 145–
58.

arranged by her lover, in league with the disapproving supervisor who is like her mother and whose lover he must also be. Freud analyses this paranoid fantasy as the transformation of the daughter's excessive attachment to the mother (hitherto an obstacle to her sexual activity) into an identification with her, as she attempts to replace her in the primal scene with the father figure.¹⁷ As Mrs Danvers attempts to draw the stricken Fontaine into such a paranoid delusion of Rebecca's watching her and Maxim 'together', the camera moves forward as if enacting or miming the watchful, punitive gaze of the first Mrs de Winter, leaving Fontaine the only option of fleeing the room.

The ghost in the machine

Fontaine's claim a moment or two later in the morning room to replace Rebecca – 'I am Mrs de Winter now!' – is proved false in the short term by the costume ball sequence when her masquerade as Lady Caroline de Winter is violently rejected by her husband. Her claim to bear the de Winter name and assume the position of object of her husband's desire can only be made good by Maxim. It is *his* narrative that rewrites the intensely imagined scene in Rebecca's bedroom (where, we discover by implication, no marital relations have in fact taken place), negating the fantasy of Rebecca localized there, rather than any successful usurpation of Rebecca's prerogatives performed by Fontaine herself. It is the now dust-laden and cobwebbed beach cottage that is revealed as the site of Rebecca's adulterous liaisons, to which Maxim's narrative is relocated from the library (where it takes place in the novel) thus allowing its current

state of delapidation as the scene of narration to contaminate retrospectively the narrated scene. But the aim of the narration is not so much to represent at last the 'dirty' truth of Rebecca's sexual activities, which are dealt with briefly in a couple of derogatory euphemisms, as to substitute the scene of Rebecca's killing in Maxim's narrative for the compellingly implied marital scene in that of Mrs Danvers.

Fontaine is released from her habitual sense of being always measured and found wanting with respect to an idealized Rebecca in the eyes of a Maxim who still hopelessly loves her, by his vehement assertion – 'I hated her!' – and his ensuing narrative of Rebecca as a sexually predatory adulteress and of his own 'dirty bargain' with her to protect the family honour. If the off-camera scene of their implied lovemaking is the subtext of the bedroom sequence, here its substitute, the unseen killing of Rebecca by Maxim, is narrated and outlined by the camera and its movements without being shown as such. Although provoked by the discovery and return of Rebecca's body back into the world of Manderley, Rebecca still remains a name without a body at the level of representation. At the level of the plot, the unseen Rebecca remains supreme, manipulating Maxim's sense of family honour to provoke him into killing her. This she does by feigning an illegitimate pregnancy that would install the bastard offspring of her adulterous liaisons as the heir of 'your precious Manderley'. In an extraordinary feat of determined and almost hypnotic suggestion, face to face with him and smiling she urges: 'Well, Max . . . aren't you going to kill me?', which he obligingly does. Maxim's puppet-like loss of control to her is, however, partly recouped at the formal level of cinematic articulation in an equally extraordinary act of ventriloquism that produces Rebecca in her absence, but for the camera.

Absent, but spoken for in her absence by Maxim's narrative, she is 'ghosted', not just by his narration and performance of her words, but by the camera's movements that lend them spectral support by enacting Rebecca's movements through its own. Beginning with a point-of-view shot motivated by Fontaine's glance at the divan, on Maxim's words – 'She was lying on the divan, a large tray of cigarette stubs beside her' – the slippage between the scene of narration and the narrated scene is further motivated by the continued presence of the same tray of stubs. The point by point correspondence between Rebecca's narrated movements and the camera's, even as it shows her absence in the present, mimes a spectral presence in, and as the means of, representation (in order to represent an unseen scene). At the point where the camera passes from representing Fontaine's glance and its object, the divan with its ash-tray (where in the past Rebecca was), into movement, rising with Rebecca from the divan and moving left as she walks towards the male narrator and confronts him, it comes to stand in for Rebecca as if she were an invisible but mobile

18 Mary Ann Doane first drew attention to this sequence in *Rebecca*, but she reads it as exemplifying the tendency of the woman's film to absent the woman, rather than as giving her a spectral presence at the narrative of her own elimination. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire: the Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 170.

and present witness to the scene of narration between Maxim and his second wife. The uncanny effect of the film's camerawork only momentarily disrupts the master narrative that dispatches Rebecca by demonstrating in the present her elimination in the past. Even so, the enigma of her smiling triumph which is only explained by the final medical revelation of her cancer rather than her pregnancy, and by her successful goading of her husband into what would be a self-incriminating murder, retrieves something of her from that master narrative even as it completes her demonization.¹⁸

The film is of course complicit with Maxim's rewriting of the fantasy of Rebecca, completing his punitive erasure of the sexually transgressive woman by producing the medical certification of her cancer, and clearing a space for Fontaine's final accession to full wifely status while denying her the position of Mistress of Manderley. Like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, the first wife haunts the ancestral seat as an obstacle to, and in defiance of, the second wife's final assumption of her place. The price paid for possession of the Master, and the elimination of the older woman, is the loss of the House. In *Jane Eyre*, with its more radical and contradictory fantasy of escaping the House and its familial power structure as well as taking possession of it, the conflagration of Thornfield in part signifies the overthrow of the Gothic seat of patriarchal power by the woman imprisoned within it (it also signifies the patriarchal punishment, through the blinding and maiming of Rochester, of the Oedipal rebel against the Law, the price of whose infraction is castration). In *Rebecca*, her possession of the House is so strongly marked and the spectatorial investment in her room so intensely elaborated, as the mise en scene of a fantasy of the sexually potent, phallic woman (phallic not as the gift, but at the expense of the Master), that the drive towards narrative closure with its Oedipal satisfactions is in part diverted and qualified. For despite the erasure of Rebecca at the level of the plot, the film returns in its closing shots to that negligee and its embroidered cover, the camera moving as the spectral presence of Rebecca herself in the very means of representation (and so the delegate of our fascination) through the flames that consume Manderley, the West wing, and Rebecca's bedroom, the site of its most highly charged and most taboo moment.

***Gaslight* and the woman's house**

Gaslight shares with *Rebecca* the structure of the female Oedipal situation as given a classic and symbolic form in *Jane Eyre*. Tania Modleski's reading of *Rebecca* was one of the first to challenge the over-identification of narrative with the male Oedipal configuration and to postulate a working through of female Oedipal wishes and fantasies that gives more precise definition to one major variant of the woman's film. Both films share the same *donnée* of an innocent,

19 See Britton, 'A new servitude', pp. 38–41 for a discussion of these structural elements of the 'Freudian feminist melodrama'.

20 Paula tells Gregory: '[Alice Alquist] was my mother's sister. My mother died when I was born. I don't know anything about her, or my father. I lived with my aunt always, as if I were her own.' As Stanley Cavell says, this narrative is suspicious, even haunting, in its very baldness. It might suggest, together with Paula's uncanny likeness to her aunt, that Alice Alquist was in fact her mother, which would not have been publicly admissible by a famous opera singer, living by herself but engaged in a secret liaison with a royal lover. Stanley Cavell, 'Naughty orators: negation of voice in *Gaslight*', in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds), *Languages of the Unsayable* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 373.

inexperienced young woman who falls in love with and marries an older man, played by an actor (Olivier, Boyer) whose performance combines the connotations of romantic, European sophistication with a cynical or disillusioned worldliness. She has to confront her husband's relation to the older woman (Rebecca, Alice Alquist), and to grasp the meaning of the older woman's possession of the house to which her husband brings her (or to which she brings him, in *Gaslight*'s reversal of the paradigm). In *Gaslight*, the narrative of an obsessive male investigation of the transgressive woman is subordinated to, and incorporated in, the narrative of the woman's discovery of, and emancipation from, the secrets of the husband, the house and the older woman. As in *Rebecca*, it is the older woman who is the masquerading subject, not the heroine.¹⁹

Alice Alquist's sealed and shuttered drawing-room in *Gaslight*, like Rebecca's bedroom, memorializes the power and presence of a dead woman. While Rebecca seems still alive and her room kept fresh as if lived in (unlike the novel), Paula (Ingrid Bergman) laments of her aunt's drawing-room: 'It's all dead in here. The whole place seems to smell of death.' However, if the room as the scene of murder is marked by the passage of time through the long years of the house's sequestration, it also bears the traces of a different psychic and symbolic economy from that which prevailed at Manderley. For 9 Thornton Square belonged to Alice Alquist. With its cabinet of treasures and mementoes of her former triumphs as a great *diva* – the one glove signed by the composer Gounod, the other given away 'to a great admirer', the vast imposing portrait of the singer in her greatest role as the Empress Theodora – the house is a site of a social, sexual and domestic economy unregulated by patriarchal law in any obvious sense. Paula inherits the house from her aunt, who had raised her and was a mother to her, on the latter's murder.²⁰ When, on their honeymoon, her husband describes his fantasy of 'a quiet house in one of the little London squares', Paula struggles with the traumatic memories of her aunt's death – 'It still comes into my dreams, a house of horror' – to grant him his wish.

The film's presentation of the locked deserted house begins with the arrival of the honeymoon couple to take possession of it as their marital home. As they stand poised on the threshold of the house and of their married life together, the classic creaking door – slowly, almost reluctantly, opening – signals their entry into the Gothic realm of a past preserved and suspended and awaiting reanimation. Paula's husband, as male interloper and intruder into Alice Alquist's domain, establishes his authority over her niece and her house, from his first brusque command: 'Come, Paula! Don't stand there in the doorway!' The moment of the unveiling of her portrait – 'O let me show her to you!' – with its musically accentuated presentation of Alice Alquist at the height of her powers as the Empress Theodora, and the accompanying reaction shot of Boyer with its mixture of alarm and

Alice Alquist's masquerade as
the Empress Theodora.
Picture courtesy: BFI Stills /
United International Pictures



knowingness, signals his previous and intense relation to the dead woman. Paula's commentary on the triumph recorded in the portrait – 'It was her greatest role. When she sang it in St Petersburg, the Tsar used to come to every performance' – passes immediately to her traumatic memory of finding her aunt's strangled body beneath the painting. It is clear that the child Paula had been disturbed by the murder and had in turn disturbed the murderer: 'I was in bed and something woke me. I've never known what. I came running down the stairs, frightened, as if I knew what had happened.' This has the classic lineaments of a childish primal scene experience – the awaking and overhearing, the terror and the anticipatory foreknowledge. The traumatic spectacle – 'She had been strangled. Her lovely face was all. . . . No! I can't stay here.' – cannot be spoken or represented. The object of Paula's distressed glance at the spot in front of the fireplace, the site of the murder, can only be shown by the camera as a dark shadow or void. Paula's reliving of these two previous scenes of

artistic-erotic triumph and of violence, whose traces haunt the room, leads to a curious repetition in the following sequence at the piano. As Paula continues her memories of her aunt's career, her husband absent-mindedly begins to play *The Last Rose of Summer*, which Paula tells him was 'her great song' which she always sang 'as a last encore. It was everyone's favourite.' A second later, he has leapt to his feet to seize violently from her the letter she finds in the score of *Theodora*, a letter which, as Sergius Bower, he had written her aunt years before on following her to London from Prague (where he had played as her accompanist). His implication in a past she does not yet know they have in common betrays itself through involuntary repetitions, first as nostalgia (*The Last Rose of Summer*, the encore he would have played as her pianist), then as violence (the snatched letter: 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so violent'). They testify to the power of the present scene of unveiling as a palimpsest which contains the layered traces of previous scenes that cannot be worked through or represented, both the scene of murder and behind it, more obscured and overwritten, the scene of artistic-erotic triumph which leaves its deposit in the portrait, and to which the murder is in some sense a response. In their interlinked nature, both have a bearing on the enigmatic disturbance located in Paula's husband and which will be played out between them as the very substance of their married life together.

The marriage as a terrain of repetition is given its own distinctive domestic geography in the husband's final arrangements for sweeping away the portrait and all of Alice Alquist's belongings, shutting them up in the attic which will be boarded up, to make room for 'our own



Bower's encore at the scene of the crime. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills / United International Pictures

new, beautiful life together'. Their final exchange – *Gregory*: 'You must forget her'. *Paula*: 'No, not her. Only what happened to her' – as the camera lingers on Bergman's troubled expression, clearly indicates that the act of exclusion that organizes the spatial relations of the new household will ensure that what happened to Alice Alquist will return to haunt its new inhabitants.

Repeating the lost object

In *Gaslight*, the husband's relation to his wife, and before her to her aunt, has a murderous and punitive intensity and elaboration that is explicitly marked as in excess of any rational or merely mercenary interest he might have in the hidden jewels. Commentary standardly explains his attempt to drive his wife mad as part of a plot to gain access to the house and to continue his search of the murdered woman's belongings. If a jewel thief's utilitarian calculations were all that was at stake, then a boarded-up, uninhabited house would have presented the ideal conditions for such a search. In Patrick Hamilton's play *Gas Light* (1938), the theatrical source for the film, the question of the husband's motivation and the relation between his search for the jewels and his persecution of his wife is posed only to be dropped. The play's detective exclaims: 'Why he should employ this mad, secret, circuitous way of getting at what he wants, God himself only knows. For the same reason perhaps that he employs this mad, secret, circuitous way of getting rid of you: that is, by slowly driving you mad and sending you into a lunatic asylum.'²¹ We are never told what this reason might be other than that the husband is a 'criminal maniac' and the detective prefers to stress the mercenary motive for the criminal's return to the scene of the crime: 'but in this case there is something more than morbid compulsion. There is treasure to be unearthed.'²²

In Cukor's film, the morbid compulsion and the treasure to be unearthed are inextricably linked. The murderer, Sergius Bower, instead of gaining access to the deserted house to search for the jewels undisturbed, adopts a false identity as Gregory Anton, travels to Italy, courts and bigamously marries the niece of the woman he has murdered on the chance that he can persuade her to return to live in the house of horror she still dreams of. Clearly his return to the scene of the crime and his compulsion to repeat the scenes he stages with his wife in the murdered aunt's drawing-room (or in the Tower of London or Lady Dalroy's concert room) indicate the presence of a compelling and dangerous fantasy, signalled in the tones and gestures of Boyer's bravura performance. The clue to the nature of this fantasy is given in the unusual likeness of Paula to her aunt, remarked on by her husband at the unveiling of the portrait. It is evident in the response of uncanny recognition of the older woman in the younger –

²¹ Patrick Hamilton, *Gas Light* (London, Constable, 1978), Act III, p. 43.

²² *Ibid.*, Act I, p. 39.

'What's wrong Uncle Brian, you look as if you've just seen a ghost?' – by the detective Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotton) when he encounters the Antons strolling in the grounds of the Tower of London. This is confirmed by the spectator's own potential recognition of Bergman in the vast portrait of Alice Alquist as the Empress Theodora, and by her singing teacher's exclamation: *Maestro Guardi*: 'You look like your Aunt!' *Paula*: 'But I don't sing like her.'

By day, her husband Gregory plays out in the aunt's renovated drawing-room a repeated game of accusation, interrogation and humiliation over a series of objects supposedly lost or hidden by his wife, while by night he rummages through the dead woman's belongings in the boarded-up attic, searching for the misappropriated Crown Jewels secretly given to Alice Alquist by her royal lover. The objects he steals from his wife in order to accuse her of losing or hiding include a cameo brooch he had given her with a matrilineal genealogy descending from grandmother to mother, and, most intimately, his fob watch which, in the concert scene at Lady Dalroy's, he 'discovers' on looking downwards to be no longer hanging on his person but concealed in the purse on his wife's lap! Ed Gallafent remarks of the incident of the missing picture that 'in his tormenting of Paula, Gregory is deliberately creating a scene in which an Alquist woman gives the concealed object to the male regulator of her behaviour. But his gratification here is limited . . . by the awareness that he has himself engineered the scene by repeatedly-concealing the painting.'²³ However, Gregory is not himself exempt from the obsessional dynamic of this repeated game of hide-and-seek followed by punishment that he plays out at his wife's expense. This is most clearly indicated at those moments of apparent 'discovery' that the object is missing. Here the camera cuts from an exhilarated or disturbed Bergman who is looking elsewhere to a reaction shot of Boyer, visible only to the camera, whose expression is a glacial mask of disdain, anger and indignation registered in hooded eyelids and a barely perceptible elongation of the eyebrows. In the concert scene, Boyer's look to camera of hurt male pride, and the pugnacious jutting of his jaw indicate Gregory's self-interpellation into the drama of theft and phallic usurpation he has himself engineered. It is all the more striking for the fact that the spectator has been apprised of his intention by an earlier shot that had signalled the moment of premeditation as he put the fob watch on. In a later moment, when he accuses his wife of having an arrangement to meet another man at the concert, he has to restrain himself from striking or strangling her – 'You lie! Why do you lie to me? . . . I'm sorry. I should not have said that. I know you never lie to me. I believe you.' We are shown the process by which he is himself repeatedly compelled to believe in the masquerade of false submission and deceit that he has fabricated for his wife, as a stand-in for the usurping and murdered Alice Alquist.

The implication that this unstated connection between the husband's

²³ Gallafent, 'Black satin', p. 96.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Gas Light*, Act II, p. 56.

'mad, secret, circuitous' search for the jewels and his 'mad, secret, circuitous' persecution of his wife in the present lies in his relation to her aunt in the past, is latent but undeveloped in Hamilton's play. When the detective breaks open the husband's bureau and the wife Bella finds there the watch and the brooch she is supposed to have hidden or lost, she exclaims: 'And he said he would give me no more gifts because I lost them. He said that in my wickedness I hid them away. Oh, Inspector, you have indeed found treasure to-night.'²⁴ The suggestion here is that the missing objects stand in for the marital exchanges, the 'gifts' between husband and wife which the wife is accused of treacherously losing or appropriating for herself, but which the husband has secretly stolen back. In thus hiding 'treasure' she repeats the 'wickedness' of the murdered aunt who has hidden the Barlow Rubies. In the play, however, the aunt, an old lady, is the husband's and not the wife's relative, and her only claim to fame is her soubriquet, 'The Cabman's Friend', due to her charitable work for London cabmen! The husband's investment in his aunt and the Barlow Rubies remains undeveloped. The film does, however, develop the wife's two imaginary crimes – that she takes from her husband what does not belong to her and loses that which he gives her – and sets them in the newly created context of the aunt/mother as previous possessor of the house and the hidden diamonds, and, it is implied, the object of the husband's murderous desire.

Marriage by gaslight

The film's presentation of the internal geography of the Gothic house is condensed in its metonymic title: the gaslight whose fluctuations trace the hidden connections between the public and private spaces of drawing-room and bedroom and the quarantined, uncanny space of the attic and its boarded-up secrets. As Stanley Cavell reports, this graphic metonymy of the internal relations and mise en scene of the house is what stays with viewers of the film long after details of the plot have been forgotten: 'people who saw the film only on its first release, over forty years ago, at once identify the film when reminded of these features'.²⁵ The flickering and lowering gaslight, the footsteps and noises overhead laden with the terror of madness, the confusion as to what is internal reality and what external, become for the spectator highly charged fragments representative of the narrative as a whole, an aesthetic relation that Roland Barthes has sought to conceptualize through a series of terms: tableau, hieroglyph and punctum. The shifting and unstable relation between the fragment charged with affect and the narrative whole has entailed this proliferating series of technical terms discussed by Victor Burgin in his commentary on Barthes's attempts to reflect on the pregnant moment or fragment.²⁶ This tendency for these elements to escape a straightforward

²⁵ Cavell, 'Naughty orators', p. 348.

²⁶ Victor Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*', in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, pp. 85–108.

The divided spaces of the Gothic house. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills / United International Pictures



representative function, to diverge from or to exceed the narrative, can be seen in the fact, remarked on by Cavell, that viewers regularly misremember the gaslight and the noises as attempts by the husband to drive his wife mad. It is, however, the game of lost objects that represents this intention to madden, while it is not clear that Gregory realizes at all that he thus betrays to his wife his secret nightly activity in the attic. However, this common misprision is possible because it is in relation to these visual and auditory fragments that Paula experiences most keenly both the possibility of her own madness as well as the possibility that the madness she experiences may not be hers.

Without following it up, Cavell suggests in passing that these sinister enigmatic signs might be considered 'fragments of a primal scene'²⁷ and this is precisely what they are. Like her aunt's furniture and portrait, her aunt's murder – 'what happened to her' – has also been confined to the attic to be put out of mind and forgotten, as the

²⁷ Cavell, 'Naughty orators', p. 356

opening sequence in the house makes clear. As mistress of the house, Paula has of course taken her aunt's place and experiences these mysterious signs after she retires of an evening to her bedroom. The 'gaslight' sequence on the evening of the drawing-room drama of the missing painting turns on a shot of Bergman glancing upwards to the gaselier as its flame goes down, with the sound of footsteps overhead echoing as if internally, followed by a reverse shot from the gaselier that zooms in on Bergman cowering on the bed. Commenting on this sequence in relation to his larger case about the 1940s 'persecuted wife' cycle of films, Andrew Britton argues:

the marriage-bed becomes the site of the heroine's ultimate terror and humiliation, and of the displacement of her sexuality into hysteria . . . but it is *Gaslight*, again, which produces the cycle's most extraordinary metaphor for the power-relations of the boudoir. Here, the master-bedroom is directly below the attic, and every evening, while Boyer plunders his wife's property in his desperate search for the purloined phallus, Bergman, prostrate on the bed, cowers in horror beneath him. The symbolic geography of the patriarchal home has rarely been mapped with such exquisite precision.²⁸

²⁸ Britton, 'A new servitude', p. 40.

Like Cavell's misremembering viewer, Britton takes this sequence as a *tableau* – as elaborated by traditional art theory (for example, by Diderot) and discussed by Barthes and Burgin – an image that has an illustrative relation to an accompanying narrative, selecting a moment or turning point that centres and summarizes the narrative action.²⁹ Bergman cowering before the gaslight and noises thus comes to represent the action of the husband's plot to drive her mad, or 'the power relations of the boudoir' and the structure of patriarchy in general. While I agree with Britton's overall argument that the persecuted wife melodrama and the female Gothic tradition reference the patriarchal family as the site of women's oppression, the relation between these intense persecutory fragments of experience, raised to the level of signifiers, and the larger narrative is more wayward and overdetermined. Their power to memorialize the film for the viewer comes not like the various 'lost' objects from their tableau-like illustration of the husband's plot, but from their functioning in the manner of what Barthes has called the *punctum*, the fragmentary element whose emotive power, more private and associational, derives from what has dropped out of, or is missing from, the narrative, or is known only as a subtext. For the scene is crucially marked by the husband's *absence*. The flickering gaslight and noises are not so much the signs of his domineering presence (as in the game of lost objects), but the traces of his presence *elsewhere*, in another scene, and the Freudian allusion (*die andere Schauplatz*) is pertinent. For watching and listening every night, in terror but without recognition, to the

²⁹ Burgin, 'Diderot, Borthes, *Vertigo*', pp. 88–92.

activities of her husband in the attic above, Paula is reliving the childhood trauma of her awakening to her aunt's murder and her interruption of the murderer's search for the hidden diamonds. Her husband's present search that in some sense continues the violence of that past scene of murder (we are finally shown Gregory at work in the attic, slashing and gutting a chair in a closeup of angry frustration) while she watches and listens in the room beneath.

Her husband's presence in both scenes and *not* by her side in the bedroom – indeed she pleads with him: 'Gregory, please don't leave me, stay with me! Gregory, please, please take me in your arms! Don't leave me.' – is what she experiences without allowing herself to recognize it. This is clear from the cathartic moment with the detective with whom she can share these intense isolated fragments of perception, return them to their various contexts and begin to work through, against her own resistance, their significance. Indeed she has only to place them in their nightly sequence for their implications to become apparent:

Paula: At last I can tell this to someone. Everynight when my husband goes out . . . [pauses]

Cameron: the light goes down?

Paula: Yes . . .

Cameron: and then what?

Paula: I hear things. I watch . . . and wait. Later on the gas goes up again . . .

Cameron: and he comes back?

Paula: Quite soon after. Always quite soon after.

Cameron: You say you think you hear things. What things?

Paula: Noises over my room.

[noises overhead]

Cameron: Is that what you mean?

Paula: Yes, yes yes! But who?

Cameron: Mrs Anton, you know, don't you? You know who's up there.

Paula: No, no.

Cameron: Are you sure you don't?

Paula: No . . . no . . . how could he be?

Paula's refusal to acknowledge what she unconsciously knows, to connect up the isolated and intensely experienced perceptions in an intelligible sequence, is evident in her reluctant pauses and hesitations. As Cavell tellingly writes of this conversation: 'A dog would have had no trouble making such a connection. Only a human being could be *prohibited* from making it, from . . . having her own thoughts.'³⁰ As in the psychoanalytic account of the process of disavowal, the denied thought or perception is projected outwards and returns in the real with hallucinatory intensity. Paula's knowledge of Gregory and his activity, disavowed, suffuses the whole house with terror; as she tells

³⁰ Cavell, 'Naughty orators', p. 357.

Paula and the detective work
through the secrets of the
gasolier. Picture courtesy: BFI
Stills / United International
Pictures



him, 'I'm telling you now I'm frightened of the house. I hear noises and footsteps. I imagine things and there are people over the house. I am frightened of myself too.' Both Paula and the spectator are released together from this hallucinatory ambiguity of the gaslight, and the noises as both inner and outer realities, by the confirmation of the detective that they can indeed be seen and heard by others. For it is only with this confirmation, as the detective mutters to himself – 'and they said the case was dead' – that the camera cuts to the attic and at last we are shown Gregory at his obsessive and desperate search for the jewels among Alice Alquist's belongings.

Cavell points out that Paula's internalized prohibition against recognizing what she knows operates against a background of male injunctions to forget, from the official who escorts her from the house as a traumatized child in the prologue, to Maestro Guardi, and to her husband in their first moments in the house together where she makes the injunction her own: 'No, not her. Only what happened to her.' Her husband's part in what happened to Alice Alquist has also haunted the film, although differentially for Paula and for the spectator. It is Boyer's face and its range of expressions, reserved for the camera and not for his wife, that have signalled to the spectator his enigmatic implication in her past: the various moments where Paula refers to her dreams of 'the house of horror' or to her discovery of her aunt's body, while Boyer's face registers a silent, hard look of knowingness and recognition. For Paula, the terrors from her past – 'For years I've been afraid of something nameless, something . . . ever since she died' – are revived as her married home becomes again a house of horrors. In a

discussion with her husband, as he defines her disturbance as madness and attributes it to an inheritance from her mother, Paula herself traces it back beyond the incident with the brooch, the first missing object, to the moment of her discovery of the letter from Sergius Bower in her aunt's music. The significance of this is that it roots the beginning of her disturbance, her sense of something being wrong and of being in danger, not in the manipulations of her husband but in her own perception of her husband's violence (like her traumatized reaction to his momentary outburst in the drawing-room over her wish to have Miss Thwaites shown up from the hall). Her husband's violence and the eerie traces of his night-time activities, as he absents himself from the domestic spaces of their present life together to reappear in the attic, the site of all that has been excluded from that life, locate and frame him so as to resonate precisely with the excluded scene of her childhood trauma, its night-time noises and its nameless fears. The madness emanating from the attic is neither hers nor her mother's. It belongs to that earlier scene, and turns on an object that means nothing to her: 'Jewels you didn't know she had, famous jewels, jewels for which he was searching that night when he was frightened away by hearing someone come down the stairs, someone he never saw: a little girl'. To this evocation of that traumatic moment, Paula can barely bring herself to reply in recognition: 'Me . . . me'. The gaslight motif from which the film takes its name signals the interdependence of the Gothic house's divided spaces and moments and the presence, elsewhere, of the husband in that other scene.

Jewels and the masquerade

The jewels, on which the narrative of murder and persecution turns, point towards a primal or ur-scene of masquerading and the male gaze played out between Alice Alquist and her royal lover the Tsar, in which the misappropriated jewels function and from which they gain their significance. It is this that lies behind both the scene of unveiling the aunt's portrait in her drawing-room that begins their married life, and the scene of murder that the room preserves. This most hidden, overwritten scenario behind the palimpsest of the present drama of marital persecution is something we only hear of in snatches and in passing references until the end, when the discovery of the jewels is explained by the final setting into place of the film's primal scene, which remains finally unseen. This unseen scene of masquerade is nevertheless materialized in that massive icon, the representation of a representation: the large portrait of Alice Alquist wearing the costume of her greatest operatic role as the Empress Theodora, across the stomach of which the Tsar's love-token taken from the Russian Crown Jewels is secretly sewn. Displaying the costume at the end of the film,

the detective reconstructs the scene we are never shown as such by the camera:

This is where Alice Alquist hid them, where all the world could see them; and yet no one would know where they were, except the man who gave them to her, watching nightly from the royal box.

In their proper circulation, their legitimate giving and taking (and safekeeping) in marriage, the family jewels (of which the Crown Jewels are the hyperbolic enlargement) are in Ed Gallafent's formulation 'an emblem of the social acknowledgement of the sexual relation' while their detour into Alice Alquist's possession constitutes them as 'an emblem of a sexual relation that can have no social [perhaps one should say *public*] existence'.³¹ This unseen scene, an offstage of the narrative, condenses elliptically the relations and positions of a sexual scenario, sexuality as precisely a scenario. It is a flagrantly perverse restaging of the heterosexual regime of the male gaze and the female spectacle. Its 'perversity' is indicated by the fact that the psychoanalytic formula for the scene is not Lacan's normative 'woman-as-phallus-for-the-man' (which has as its precondition the woman's castration: Lacan's 'such is the woman behind her veil: it is the absence of the penis that makes her phallus, the object of desire').³² Rather it is the Freudian woman-with-phallus, the construction of the fetishist who secures both his own bodily integrity and his desire reflected in the figure of the woman with phallic accessories. The paradox of secrecy on display, like Põe's and Lacan's stolen letter exhibited so that it cannot be recognized, flaunted where it cannot be seen, mark it as precisely a *purloined* phallus.³³ In the portrait of Alice Alquist as the Empress Theodora, her crown, her magisterial reserve, her vast jewelled dress constitute her as an icon of the phallic mother, an archaic image veiled and dirt-laden when we first see it, and later buried away out of sight in the attic. If the fantasy it memorializes is one of legitimacy (who else but the Empress has the right to wear the Crown Jewels?), it is conditioned by its illegitimacy, its frisson of secrecy, the scandalous expropriation of the Crown Jewels as patrilineal signifiers to serve as a love-token, the signifier of desire in the private playing out in public of a fantasy of phallic empowerment of the woman. What she receives legitimately in her masquerade as the Empress she keeps secretly as Alice Alquist. This breach of patrilineal law is a testimony to the artistic success and sexual autonomy of Alice Alquist, like the glove signed by Gounod (the return of its missing twin glove to Paula is the exact antithesis of her husband's compulsion to steal the jewels).

Gothic and the punishment of transgression

Alice Alquist's brutal murder, like the demoralization and incapacitation of her niece, heiress and double, can be read as a

31 Gallafent, 'Black satin', p. 101.

32 Jacques Lacan, 'The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious', *Écrits* (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 322. See citation and commentary in Stephen Heath, 'Joan Riviere and the masquerade', in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, p. 52.

33 For Lacan's discussion of Poe's 'The purloined letter', see Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on 'The purloined letter'', in Muller and Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). For a discussion of the difference between these psychoanalytic formulations, see Fletcher, 'Versions of masquerade', pp. 48–57.

punishment for her assumption of apparent social and sexual autonomy. Her strangled body is found by the child Paula in front of the portrait of her as Empress that memorialized her charismatic and secretly transgressive masquerade. This is contextualized by Cukor in the Tower of London sequence in a Gothic discourse of lineage, represented by the British Crown Jewels, and of the punishments for its usurpation (which does not appear in the original play). Paula realizes the loss of her brooch, the film's first missing object, as the guide describes the executions of Lady Jane Grey and Henry VIII's Queen, Katherine Howard (a female usurper and a supposedly adulterous consort respectively). Paula withdraws in a fever of anxiety to search her bag for the missing brooch, as she wanders through a dungeon crowded with the shadowy instruments of torture and with the guide's voiceover describing the infliction of the rack 'in an effort to extract a confession'. She is soon followed by the dark figure of her husband to a rise of menacing music on the soundtrack. In a structurally reciprocal moment, the husband intones from the guidebook a rapt and lyrical description of the Koh-i-noor Diamond, the Black Prince's Ruby and the Stuart Sapphire of James II as his wife fumbles anxiously in her purse for the missing brooch; indeed he recites it by heart without looking at the guidebook, which suggests both the eeriness of his fantasmatic involvement with the institution of the Crown Jewels and the present moment's status as a repetition. This double emphasis on the man's fetishistic rapport with the jewels – 'Jewels are wonderful, they have a life of their own!' – and the extraction of guilty secrets and the punishment of women are both located within a self-conscious female Gothic narrative paradigm that goes back to Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Brontë. The interest of the woman as reader and spectator of such narratives has been ironically established by the film through the figure of Miss Thwaites (Dame May Whitty). In her conversation with Paula on the train to Lake Como, she passes excitedly from her novel, with its Bluebeard plot of a young wife whose husband has six former wives buried in the cellar – 'I enjoy a good murder, now and then' – to the murder of Alice Alquist herself in Thornton Square, where coincidentally she also lives.

The film's ironic citation of Gothic conventions for critical purposes culminates in the final scene in the attic where Paula assumes the role of madwoman to mock and frustrate her husband's appeals to her. It is structurally parallel to the scene in the cottage on the beach in *Rebecca*. Both scenes reverse the terms and logic that have governed their film's animating fantasies. Where Maxim's revisionary narrative negates the fantasy of Rebecca so potently elaborated in the bedroom sequence, translating its implied scene of lovemaking into a scene of killing, Paula's extraordinary tableau of madness reverses the process whereby her husband's psychotic compulsions have trapped and punished her in the image of her aunt with her purloined objects and

sexual secrets. Through her the film cites the climactic mad scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) which has an analogous structure of dependency on a previous scene of marital violence and death that the opera does not stage, an unseen scene where the tragic heroine stabs her husband on their wedding night. Paula had been attempting to sing the great parting duet *Verrano a te* from Act I of *Lucia* in the singing lesson with Maestro Guardi at the beginning of the film. In the attic scene she picks up and wields the knife, momentarily threatening to enact the opera's offstage moment of reversal of all the violence inflicted on the heroine in her enforced marriage, only to throw it away in a mime of the mentally defective woman and the lost object she is incompetent to retain. The controlled and mocking anger of her performance as the madwoman before her husband, roped to his chair, as Ed Gallafent argues, reverses the Gothic role of victim, 'the madwoman in the attic', in a kind of anti-masquerade.³⁴ She uses the oppressive role, fashioned for her by her husband, not to hide her wishes but to play out the contradictions of feeling by which she has been trapped. Her performance exorcizes the emotional hold over her that her husband has tried to exploit through his wide-eyed, tear-stained expression – 'Look into my eyes' – and plangent appeals.

If I were not mad . . . whatever you had done, I could have pitied and protected you, but because I am mad I hate you, because I am mad I have betrayed you, because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart – without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret; watching you go with glory in my heart. . . . Take this man away!

Bergman's performance makes it clear that Paula's crescendo of defiance and triumphant repudiation of her husband's appeals – 'with glory in my heart' – is achieved at some cost, manifest as she turns away sobbing at its conclusion. The madwoman's rhetorical cadenzas and melodramatic gestures – wielding the knife that might cut him free, as he urges her to, or kill him, then throwing it away – allow her to exorcize her madness as a return to sender, to act out and affirm her anger over her other feelings of loyalty, pity and protectiveness that have been abused and need to be set aside: 'If I were not mad I could have. . . .'

The movement of the film is to free the woman from her entrapment, to reverse and expose the mechanisms by which she has been trapped, to evict the patriarch from the house and to focus attention finally on the enigma of the husband and his obsessions, which it is clear he does not himself comprehend:

I don't ask you to understand me. Between us all the time were those jewels – like a fire in my brain that separated us – those jewels that I wanted all my life!

Boyer's whispered, *sotto voce* delivery, his intent gaze not at Paula

but into camera, the eerily quavering organ music as he speaks, foreground the enigma of the man's murderous fetishistic obsession in a formal inset or frame, like a miniature aria or verse soliloquy. This is broken by his shift into direct address in his final puzzled comment to his wife – 'I don't know why'. The film concludes as, in response to the detective's request to visit her, Paula turns to him and puts *her* hand on *his* arm, which echoes and exactly reverses the moment when her fiancé's hand emerges to clutch her arm and to claim her on the railway station at Lake Como. This final moment is rhymed with and against the earlier one by the repeated expostulation of shocked pleasure – 'Well!' – with which the film's exemplary female spectator, the ubiquitous Miss Thwaites, greets both.

Both films, I have argued, rework closely related generic material – the female Gothic and its conventions – with a similar fantasy structure – the female Oedipus. The conclusions of both films turn on a choice between the man and the house, between marrying the romantic older man, the father-figure, and being the mistress of the house. If Fontaine wins Maxim as finally hers, she loses the house to Rebecca who remains Mistress of Manderley in its very destruction. By contrast, Paula instructs the detective: 'Mr Cameron – take this man away', while remaining in possession of her aunt's house. This partly testifies to a difference of narrative premise – in *Rebecca* the house belongs to the husband and is the very embodiment of the de Winter patriarchal and aristocratic legacy, while in *Gaslight* it belongs to the wife, inherited from the murdered aunt/mother. Inscribed in this difference of *donnée*, however, is a difference of project. For just as Cukor's film rewrites Patrick Hamilton's play, redistributing both the house and the murdered aunt from the murderous husband to the terrorized wife, so it could be said to reverse the conservative Oedipal fantasy of *Rebecca*. *Rebecca's* Oedipal conclusion promotes the unworldly *ingénue* to a symbolic 'thirty-six years old', and unites her with the brooding patriarch (thus ironically depriving him of his fantasy investment in her: 'It's gone forever – that funny, young, lost look I loved . . . I killed that when I told you about Rebecca. In a few hours you've grown so much').

Each film leads the spectator on a search for the dead woman's secret, localized in her closed and shuttered room, through a successive layering of cinematic 'screen memories', of scenes behind scenes, a scene of sexual triumph or dominance and a scene of killing that violently cancels or reverses it. *Gaslight's* structural reversal of *Rebecca* entails a different positioning and significance of the older woman and her masquerade, and of each film's investment in it as its 'primal scene' and site of fantasy. The fantasy of *Rebecca* is offered to the spectator through Fontaine's participation in it, orchestrated by Mrs Danvers, and it turns on the imagined, hinted-at, coupling of Rebecca and Maxim. It is revealed as a delusion by Maxim's later admission that he did not love Rebecca but hated and killed her.

Nevertheless, the film's very existence takes the form of a dream of return by the second, but exiled, Mrs de Winter, who sleeps with Maxim but dreams of Manderley. Both the film's opening and closing moments, its voiceover dream sequence and its final image of the flames devouring the embroidered cover and its hidden negligee, reveal the persistence and repetition of a scene and a fantasy that – in defiance of its Oedipal plot – can never finally be laid to rest.

Where Rebecca, in effect, usurps the patrilineal transmission of Manderley as the *mise en scene* of her seductive dominance and social mastery, Alice Alquist's house is her own, and her scene of triumph and transgression lies elsewhere, on the stage of the St Petersburg Opera House, and is memorialized in the grand portrait in her drawing-room. The film works back from the portrait through the trauma of her murder to the scene of her performance before the Tsar. The spectator's point of entry to its fantasmatic dimension entirely bypasses Paula, who knows nothing of its hidden significance or its power. The function of the fantasy's subject is split between the husband and the detective, both of whom play out their desiring relation to the dead woman through her unwitting niece. Where the husband compulsively replays the drama of the lost or purloined object and the punishment of the aunt's transgressions in the person of her niece, obsessed with taking for himself the illicitly diverted jewels, the detective restores to Paula her aunt's missing glove and pieces together the significance of the jewels' hidden location, the secret but public scene of desire in which they featured. The Gothic framing of Paula as scapegoat for her aunt's transgressions, and the film's emancipation of her from the logic of retribution through the figure of the detective and his desire, reverses the Oedipal fantasy of female Gothic (marrying the father-figure), but it leaves enigmatic Paula's relation to the fantasy embodied in her aunt as phallic *diva*. (Her admission to Maestro Guardi – 'But I don't sing like her' – perhaps has its point here.) *Gaslight*'s drama is exhausted with the unlocking of the door to the attic, the freeing of the woman from the role of madwoman and the expulsion of the madman from the house. While the detective's desire for Paula as the refiguring of her aunt is clear, as are his credentials as both recipient and restorer of her aunt's glove, the film's final pairing of the couple can only be perfunctory at best, and the question of Paula's desire, at home in Alice Alquist's house and on the other side of the Oedipal Gothic, remains unexplored.

'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style

JEFFREY SCONCE

*Nobody likes movies like Teenagers from Outer Space or Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy save any loon sane enough to realize that the whole concept of Good Taste is concocted to keep people from having a good time, from reveling in a crassness that passeth all understanding. . . . But fuck those people who'd rather be watching The Best Years of Our Lives or David and Lisa. We got our own good tastes . . .*¹

Written five years before Pierre Bourdieu published his monumental study on the social construction of taste, Lester Bangs's diatribe against a nebulously defined group of cultural custodians epitomizes Bourdieu's contention that 'tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others'. 'It is no accident', writes Bourdieu, 'that when they have to be justified, they are asserted negatively, by the refusal of other tastes'.² Thus, in the spirit of Lester Bangs, the editors of *Zontar*, a Boston-based fanzine devoted primarily to the promotion of 'badfilm', note that their publication 'is *not* for the delicate tastebuds of the pseudo-genteel cultural illiterati who enjoy mind-rotting, soul-endangering pabulum like *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* and the other white-boy 'new-age' puke-shit served up from the bowels of PBS during pledge-week'.³ Meanwhile, a 1990 issue of *Subhuman*, a fanzine featuring articles on cinematic manifestations of

1 Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 122–3.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 57.

3 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

4 *Subhuman*, no. 15, front cover.

5 'Fanzines' are home-produced, photocopied magazines circulated among fans and devoted to an often narrow area of interest in popular culture.

6 *Temple of Schlock* is another fanzine dedicated to this cinema.

'necrophilia, 3-D surrealism, animal copulation, pregnant strippers, horror nerdism, and bovine flatulence', labels itself a journal of 'eccentric film and video kulture'.⁴

The stridently confrontational tastes espoused by Bangs, *Zontar* and *Subhuman* over this fifteen-year period describe the gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history. Publications devoted to this 'trash' cinema include such magazines, fanzines and makeshift journals as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, *Subhuman*, *Trashola*, *Ungawa*, *Pandemonium*, and the RE/Search volume, *Incredibly Strange Films*.⁵ The most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, a subterranean companion to Leonard Maltin's *Movies On TV*, which catalogues hundreds of bizarre titles culled from Weldon's late-night television viewing marathons in New York City. Taken together, the diverse body of films celebrated by these various fanzines and books might best be termed 'paracinema'. As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. In doing so, paracinema represents the most developed and dedicated of cinephilic subcultures ever to worship at 'the temple of schlock'.⁶

The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite cadre of would-be cinematic tastemakers. Certainly, the paracinematic audience likes to see itself as a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace. As a short subject, this audience would be more inclined to watch a bootlegged McDonald's training film than *Man with a Movie Camera*, although, significantly, many in the paracinematic community would no doubt be familiar with this more respectable member of the avant-garde canon. Such calculated negation and refusal of 'elite' culture suggests that the politics of social stratification and taste in paracinema is more complex than a simple high-brow/low-brow split, and that the cultural politics of 'trash culture' are becoming ever more ambiguous as this 'aesthetic' grows in influence. In recent years, the paracinematic community has seen both the institutionalization and commercialization of their once

renegade, neo-camp aesthetic. Although paracinematic taste may have its roots in the world of 'low-brow' fan culture (fanzines, film conventions, memorabilia collections, and so on), the paracinematic sensibility has recently begun to infiltrate the avant garde, the academy, and even the mass culture on which paracinema's ironic reading strategies originally preyed. Art museums that once programmed only Italian Neo-Realism or German Neo-Expressionism now feature retrospectives of 1960s Biker films and career overviews of exploitation auteurs such as Herschell Gordon Lewis and Doris Wishman. No doubt to the dismay and befuddlement of cultural hygienists like Allan Bloom and James Twitchell, academic courses in film studies increasingly investigate 'sleazy' genres such as horror and pornography. Recently, the trash aesthetic has even made inroads into mainstream popular taste. The ironic reading strategies honed by the badfilm community through countless hours of derisive interaction with late-night science fiction are now prepackaged for cable in programmes such as *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. Similarly, Turner Network Television now presents a weekly sampling of the paracinematic pantheon in Friday night, '100% Weird' triple features. Even Blockbuster video, America's corporate bastion of cinematic conservatism, features a 'le bad' section in many of their stores, where patrons can find the work of John Waters, William Castle and other 'disreputable' filmmakers. Perhaps most incredibly, *Batman*'s director Tim Burton recently directed a multi-million dollar biopic of Ed Wood Jr, the director of such paracinematic classics as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) and *Glen or Glenda* (1953), an artist who himself never spent over a few thousand dollars on any one picture.⁷ Clearly, in cinematic circles of all kinds, there has been a significant realignment on the social terrain of taste, a powerful response to what has been termed 'the siren song of crap'.

⁷ In a fittingly perverse tribute to Wood, Burton's film won widespread critical acclaim and yet bombed at the box office, making less than six million dollars on its initial release in the USA.

A key element in the paracinematic aesthetic is the 'gore' film, a genre that most fans argue debuts with Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963). Lewis is often acclaimed for the decidedly 'unartful' presentation of his gore set pieces. Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research



At first glance, the paracinematic sensibility, in all its current manifestations, would seem to be identical to the 'camp' aesthetic outlined by Susan Sontag some thirty years ago. Without a doubt, both sensibilities are highly ironic, infatuated with the artifice and excess of obsolescent cinema. What makes paracinema unique, however, is its aspiration to the status of a 'counter-cinema'. Whereas 'camp' was primarily a reading strategy that allowed gay men to rework the Hollywood cinema through a new and more expressive subcultural code, paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic 'art', aggressively attacking the established canon of 'quality' cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art. Camp was an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation. Paracinema, on the other hand, is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation.

Who, exactly, is the paracinematic audience at war with, and what is at stake in such a battle? Consider the following diatribe from *Zontar*:

Where the philosophical pygmies search the snob-ridden art galleries, flock to the false comfort of PBS-produced pseudo-gentility, WE look elsewhere. We seek the explanations for the decline of Hu-Manity in the most debased and misunderstood manifestations of the IDIOT CULTURE. Monster movies, comic books, cheap porn videos, TV preachers, of course!!! But we search ever deeper into the abyss. The Home Shopping Network. Late-Night Cable TV-Product Worship-Testimonial Shows. Tiffany Videos. We leave purity to those other assholes. The search for BADTRUTH is only for the brave few, like you, whose all-consuming HATE is powerful enough to resist the temptations of REFINEMENT, TASTE, and ESCAPISM – the miserable crumbs tossed from the table by the growing mass of REPUBLICAN THIRTYSOMETHING COUNTRY-CLUB CHRISTIAN ZOMBIES who now rule this wretched planet.⁸

⁸ *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

The paracinematic audience promotes their tastes and textual proclivities in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites, those purveyors of the status quo who not only rule the world, but who are also responsible for making the contemporary cinema, in the paracinematic mind, so completely boring. Nor does the paracinematic community care much for the activities of film scholars and critics. For example, an editor of *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, a sister publication of *Zontar*, encourages readers to hone their knowledge of trash-culture classics ridiculed by the academy (in this case the sword and sandal epic, *The Silver Chalice* [Victor Saville, 1954]), thereby 'amazing your friends and embarrassing the jargon-slinging empty-headed official avatars of critical discourse'.⁹

⁹ *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

At times, factions of the paracinematic audience have little patience even for one another. This rift is perhaps most pointedly embodied by

the competing agendas of *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video*, two fanzines turned magazines with international circulations that promote rival visions of the 'trash' aesthetic. While *Psychotronic* concentrates on the sizable segment of this community interested in uncovering and collecting long lost titles from the history of exploitation, *Film Threat* looks to transgressive aesthetics/genres of the past as avant-garde inspiration for contemporary independent filmmaking, championing such 'underground' auteurs as Nick Zedd and Richard Kern. In a particularly nasty swipe, a subscription form for *Film Threat* features a drawing of the 'typical' *Film Threat* reader, portrayed as a dynamic, rockabilly-quiffed hipster surrounded by admiring women. This is juxtaposed with a drawing of the 'typical' *Psychotronic* reader, depicted as passive, overweight and asexual, with a bad complexion.

Despite such efforts at generating counter-distinction within the shared cultural project of attacking 'high-brow' cinema, the discourses characteristically employed by paracinematic culture in its valorization of 'low-brow' artefacts indicate that this audience, like the film elite (academics, aesthetes, critics), is particularly rich with 'cultural capital' and thus possesses a level of textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis. In terms of education and social position, in other words, the various factions of the paracinematic audience and the elite cineastes they commonly attack would appear to share what Bourdieu terms a 'cultural pedigree'.¹⁰ Employing the terminology of US sociologist Herbert Gans, these groups might be thought of as radically opposed 'taste publics' that are nevertheless involved in a common 'taste culture'. As Gans writes: 'Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from available offerings of culture'.¹¹

Whether thought of as a subculture, an aesthetic or a sensibility, the recent flourishing of paracinema represents not just a challenge to aesthete taste, but the larger fragmentation of a common taste culture, brought about by various disaffected segments of middle-class youth. Although it would be difficult to define the precise dimensions or identify the exact constituency of this particular taste public, I would argue that the paracinematic community, like the academy and the popular press, embodies primarily a male, white, middle-class, and 'educated' perspective on the cinema. Representations of this 'community' are rare, but can be glimpsed, among other places, at the fringes of Richard Linklater's ode to baby-buster anomie, *Slacker* (1991). Linklater documents the desultory activities of bored students, would-be bohemians and miscellaneous cranks, all of whom exist at the economic and cultural periphery of a typical college town.¹² In a more reflexive turn, a fanzine from San Francisco describes the world of 'low-life scum', disheveled men in their twenties manifesting 'a

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the cultural pedigree, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 63.

¹¹ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 69–70.

¹² In the film's most explicit nod to the paracinematic mentality, one particularly deranged character bases his elaborate conspiracy theories on the 'truth' to be found in late-night, science-fiction movies.

- 14 This particular struggle over cinematic taste also takes place in a variety of cultural contexts. For an account of the cultivation of a disreputable aesthetic in Swedish youth culture, see Göran Bolin, 'Beware! Rubbish! Popular culture and strategies of distinction', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994), pp. 33–49.

- 15 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 60.

- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.

Histrionic acting is a hallmark of the paracinematic aesthetic. Here, having rolled a 'Yankee' down a hill in a barrel spiked with nails, two psychotic hayseeds admire their handiwork in Herschell Gordon Lewis's *2000 Maniacs* (1964).
Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

fascination with all things sleazy, bizarre, and macabre'.¹³ Paracinematic interests also often intersect with the more familiar subcultures of science-fiction fandom. Regardless of their individual interests and ultimate allegiances, however, the paracinematic audience cultivates an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection, marking a deviant taste public disengaged from the cultural hierarchies of their overarching taste culture.

Such acrimonious battles within a single taste culture are not uncommon.¹⁴ As Bourdieu writes: 'Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-a-vis lower groups'.¹⁵ As the alienated faction of a social group high in cultural capital, the paracinematic audience generates distinction within its own social space by celebrating the cultural objects deemed most noxious (low-brow) by their taste culture as a whole. Paracinema thus presents a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the 'refined' sensibility of the parent taste culture. It is a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites, not unlike Duchamp's notorious unveiling of a urinal in an art gallery. As Bourdieu states: 'The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated'.¹⁶ By championing films like *2000 Maniacs* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964), *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965), and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1963), and by associating themselves with home shopping networks,



pornography and TV preachers, this community is, in effect, renouncing its 'cultural pedigree' and attempting to distance itself from what it perceives as elite (and elitist) taste.

Despite the paracinematic community's open hostility to the 'jargon-sliding avatars of critical discourse', many scholars see this trend towards the valorization of 'trash' at work in the academy itself, especially in the realm of media studies. In "'High culture" revisited', for example, Jostein Gripsrud argues that a major segment of contemporary media scholars routinely attacks all forms of high culture while indiscriminately valorizing mass culture in its place. As Gripsrud states somewhat sarcastically, 'Presenting oneself as a soap-fan in scholarly circles could be considered daring or provocative some ten years ago. Nowadays it is more of a prerequisite for legitimate entry into the academic discourse on soaps in some Anglo-American fora.'¹⁷

Gripsrud speculates that this proclivity among many contemporary scholars to condemn high culture and valorize mass culture is a function of their unique trajectory in social space. 'Such upwardly mobile subjects are placed in a sort of cultural limbo, not properly integrated in the lower-class culture they left, nor in the upper-class high culture they have formally entered. Since they are newcomers, they are faced with a need to make choices concerning what to do in and with their acquired position.'¹⁸ Gripsrud believes that the valorization of mass culture serves as a form of 'symbolic homecoming' that allows such scholars to 'strive for or pretend re-integration into the classes they once left, preferably as "leaders" in some sense, "voices" for the people'.¹⁹

Gripsrud's depiction of the intellectual in limbo is a particularly apt description of the contemporary graduate student, the figure within the institution of the academy who is perched the most precariously between the domains of cultural, educational and economic capital. Not surprisingly, paracinematic culture is a particularly active site of investment for many contemporary graduate students in film studies. Often, the connections between graduate film study and paracinematic culture are quite explicit, since many students now pursuing an advanced degree in film began as fans of exploitation genres such as horror and science fiction. Some students retain their interest in trash culture as a secret, guilty pleasure. Others, however, increasingly seek to focus their work on these previously marginalized and debased forms of cinema. Influenced by the importation of cultural studies to the USA during the 1980s, and writing in the wake of film scholars who were increasingly willing to address traditionally 'untouchable' cinematic genres such as horror and pornography, many students in media studies wish to continue pushing the limits of the traditional cinematic canon and the constraints of conventional academic enterprise. At stake is a sense of both institutional and cultural distinction. As John Fiske writes, 'Many young fans are successful at school and are steadily accumulating official cultural capital, but wish to differentiate themselves, along the axis of age at least, from the

¹⁷ Jostein Gripsrud, "'High culture" revisited', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1989), p. 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

20 John Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–4.

social values and cultural tastes (or *habitus*) of those who currently possess the cultural and economic capital they are still working to acquire'.²⁰ As paracinematic texts and concerns increasingly infiltrate film studies, however, many graduate students find themselves caught between the institutional discourses (and agendas) of the film elite as represented by the academy, and the 'fan' activities of the paracinematic community with which they feel a previous affinity. Raised in mass culture, such students are not always willing to give up the excesses of the drive-in for the discipline of Dreyer. The question is what to do with such textual experience and expertise.

Debate within the academy over the politics of the canon is not new. Nor is it unusual for 'fan' cultures to make themselves heard within the academy (most film scholars, one would assume, study the cinema because they were a fan first). What is unusual in paracinematic culture's gradual infiltration of the academy is the manner in which this group so explicitly foregrounds the cultural politics of taste and aesthetics, not just in society at large, but within the academy itself. Graduate students with an interest in 'trash' cinema often find themselves in the ironic position of challenging the legitimacy of the very institution they are attending in order to obtain cultural validation and authority over issues of politics and taste. Such students are struggling to make the transition from a mere fan to an accredited scholar. Though both fan and scholar may be equally dedicated (and even knowledgeable) in their involvement with a particular cultural form, they differ tremendously in terms of their respective status within society as a whole. In a hierarchical social system marked by the differential circulation of cultural and economic capital, graduate students seeking to make this crucial transition of accreditation must submit themselves, quite literally, to the *discipline* of film studies in both its institutional and punitive forms. In doing so, the discipline works to shape both knowledge and taste, linking them in a process that is every bit as political in the academy as it is in the culture the academy seeks to study. As Bourdieu notes, 'At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness'.²¹ In this way, the legitimizing function of the academy in issues of knowledge, taste and aesthetics works to conceal relations of power and control, both within the institution itself and the society that sanctions that institution's cultural authority.

By challenging this disciplinary authority, the paracinematic audience, both academic and non-academic, epitomizes what Bourdieu terms the 'new style autodidact'. As described by Bourdieu, the autodidact is a figure alienated from the legitimate mode of educational and cultural acquisition. Estranged or excluded from legitimate modes of acquisition, autodidacts invest in alternative forms of cultural capital, those not fully recognized by the educational

21 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 57–8.

system and the cultural elite. Bourdieu describes two backgrounds typical of this new style autodidact:

'middle-ground' arts such as cinema, jazz, and, even more, strip cartoons, science-fiction or detective stories are predisposed to attract the investments either of those who have entirely succeeded in converting their cultural capital into educational capital or those who, not having acquired legitimate culture in the legitimate manner (i.e., through early familiarization), maintain an uneasy relationship with it, subjectively or objectively, or both. These arts, not yet fully legitimate, which are disdained or neglected by the big holders of educational capital, offer a refuge or a revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital (especially if it is not fully recognized scholastically) while at the same time taking credit for contesting the established hierarchy of legitimacies and profits.²²

22 Ibid., p. 87.

The autodidact is a person who invests in unsanctioned culture either because he or she can 'afford' to, having already made a successful conversion of legitimate cultural and educational capital into economic capital, or who feel, because of their tentative and at times alienated relationship with 'legitimate culture', that such disreputable investments are more durable and potentially more 'rewarding'.

It should not be surprising, then, that paracinematic fans, as exiles from the legitimizing functions of the academy, and many graduate students, as the most disempowered faction within the academy itself, both look to trash culture as a site of 'refuge and revenge'. Such autodidacticism constitutes, for Bourdieu, a form of 'counterculture', one working to free itself from 'the constraints of the scholastic market'. 'They strive to do so by producing another market with its own consecrating agencies', writes Bourdieu, 'capable of challenging the pretension of the educational system to impose the principles of evaluation of competencies and manners which reign in the scholastic market.'²³ For its audience, paracinema represents a final textual frontier that exists beyond the colonizing powers of the academy, and thus serves as a staging ground for strategic raids on legitimate culture and its institutions by those (temporarily) lower in educational, cultural and/or economic capital. Such a struggle demonstrates that battles over the canon, in any discipline, are as much conflicts over the processes and politics by which an entire academic field validates its very existence and charts its own future, fought by groups within the academy as stratified in their institutional power as society at large is stratified in terms of cultural and economic power.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

On one hand, it would be easy to explain the turn towards trash cinema as yet another example of the generational politics of the canon in the academy, a struggle that legitimated cinema in the face of literature, Hollywood in the face of art cinema and, most recently, television in the face of Hollywood. But there is more here than a

struggle over the canon and the politics of object choice. The study of trash cinema suggests a struggle over the task of cinema scholarship as a whole, especially in terms of defining the relationship between aesthetics and cultural criticism. Whether attacking traditional cultural markets and intellectual institutions as a fan, or attempting to bridge the two worlds as a student, the paracinematic audience presents in its often explicit opposition to the agendas of the academy a dispute over *how* to approach the cinema as much as a conflict over *what* cinema to approach. At issue is not only which films get to be studied, but which questions are to be asked about the cinema in the first place. What I am interested in exploring in the remainder of this essay is the relationship between paracinematic culture and the aesthete culture this group associates with the academy, as well as the place of the contemporary graduate film student in bridging these two often antagonistic sensibilities. How are these groups similar, how do they differ and, perhaps most importantly, how might the trash aesthetic ultimately impact the academy? I am particularly interested in how the two communities approach issues of cinematic 'style' and 'excess'. I will argue that paracinema hinges on an aesthetic of excess, and that this paracinematic interest in excess represents an explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthete discourses in the academy. The cultural politics involved in this struggle, however, can be clarified by first examining similarities between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinema.

Counter-cinemas

Throughout the history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit the textual pleasures of more 'commonplace' audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining a sense of cultural distinction for film scholars. Frequently, the promotion of such counter-cinemas has been organized around what has become a dominant theme in academic film culture: namely, the sense of loss over the medium's unrealized artistic and political potential. From this perspective, the cinema once held the promise of a revolutionary popular art form when, as Annette Michelson writes, 'a certain euphoria enveloped . . . early filmmaking and theory'. '[T]here was', she continues, 'a very real sense in which the revolutionary aspirations of the modernist movement in literature and arts, on the one hand, and of a Marxist or Utopian tradition, on the other hand, could converge in the hopes and promises, as yet undefined, of the new medium'.²⁴ Instead, these hopes were dashed by the domination of the public taste and mind by Hollywood cinema. And while there has never been a shortage of critical interest in the classical Hollywood cinema, championing counter-cinemas that break with the conventions of

²⁴ Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration', in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 472.

Hollywood production and representation remains a central project of film aesthetes and academics. This critical programme proceeds both artistically, by valorizing a body of 'art' films over the mainstream, commercial cinema, and politically, by celebrating those filmmakers who seem to disrupt the conventional narrative machinery of Hollywood.²⁵

In cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy, explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents. United with the film elite in their dislike of Hollywood banality and yet frequently excluded from the circles of academic film culture, the paracinematic community nonetheless often adopts the conventions of 'legitimate' cinematic discourse in discussing its own cinema. As Fiske notes, fan groups are often 'aware that their object of fandom [is] devalued by the criteria of official culture and [go] to great pains to argue against this misevaluation. They frequently [use] official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts [are] as 'good' as the canonized ones and constantly [evoke] legitimate culture . . . as points of comparison.'²⁶ Elite discourse often appears either earnestly or parodically in discussions of paracinematic films. A fanzine review of the obscure 1964 film, *The Dungeons of Harrow*, is typical. The fanzine describes the film as 'a twisted surreal marvel, a triumph of spirit and vision over technical incompetence and abysmal production values. The film can be seen as a form of art brut – crude, naive, pathetic – but lacking the poetry and humor often associated with this style. Perhaps art brutarian would better serve to describe this almost indescribable work.'²⁷

As in the academic film community, the paracinematic audience recognizes Hollywood as an economic and artistic institution that represents not just a body of films, but a particular mode of film production and its accompanying signifying practices. Furthermore, the narrative form produced by this institution is seen as somehow 'manipulative' and 'repressive', and linked to dominant interests as a form of cultural coercion. In their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*, V. Vale and Andrea Juno, two of the most visible cultural brokers in the realm of paracinema, describe why low-budget films helmed by idiosyncratic visionaries are so often superior to mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest \$20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein. Meetings with lawyers, accountants, and corporate boards are what films in Hollywood are all about. . . . Often [low-budget] films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by

²⁵ For an influential account of such an agenda, see Peter Wollen's 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 120–29.

²⁶ Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 36.

²⁷ *Subhuman*, no. 16, p. 3.

²⁸ V. Vale, Andrea Juno and Jim Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1986), p. 5.

²⁹ *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For examples of work on exploitation cinema produced within an academic context, see Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Eric Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": a history of exploitation films, 1919–1959' (Dissertation: University of Texas at Austin, 1994).

individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget – mostly the latter. Secondly, they often present unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence, and other mores.²⁸

Such rhetoric could just as easily be at home in an elite discussion of the French New Wave or the American New Cinema. Products of a shared taste culture, paracinematic cinephiles, like the scholars and critics of the academy, continue to search for unrecognized talent and long forgotten masterpieces, producing a pantheon that celebrates a certain stylistic unity and/or validates the diverse artistic visions of unheralded 'auteurs'.

Zontar, for example, devotes almost all of its attention to the work of Larry Buchanan, who is celebrated as 'the greatest director of all time' and as a maker of films that must be regarded as 'absolute and unquestionable holy writ'.²⁹ Elsewhere, *Zontar* hails Buchanan as 'a prophet of transcendental banality . . . who eclipses Bergman in evoking a sense of alienation, despair and existential angst'.³⁰ As this rather tongue-in-cheek hyperbole suggests, paracinematic culture, like that of the academy, continues to generate its own forms of internal distinction by continually redefining its vanguard, thereby thwarting unsophisticated dilettantes and moving its audience as a whole on to increasingly demanding and exclusive paracinematic films. In its contemporary and most sophisticated form, paracinema is an aggressive, esoteric and often painfully ascetic counter-aesthetic, one that produces, in its most extreme manifestations, an ironic form of reverse elitism. 'The fine art of great badfilm is not a laughing matter to everybody', says one fan. 'Its adherents are small in number, but fanatical in pickiness. Badness appreciation is the most acquired taste, the most refined.'³¹

Invoking Larry Buchanan, the mastermind of films like *Mars Needs Women* (1966) and *Zontar the Thing from Venus* (1966), as a greater director than Ingmar Bergman, however, reaffirms that the paracinematic community defines itself in opposition not only to mainstream Hollywood cinema, but to the (perceived) counter-cinema of aesthetes and the cinematic academy. Again, as with any taste public, this elite cadre of 'aesthetes' cannot be definitively located in a particular author, methodology, or school of academic/journalistic criticism. Paracinematic vitriol also often ignores the fact that low-budget exploitation films have increasingly become legitimized as a field of study within the academy.³² For purposes of distinction, however, all that is required is a nebulous body of those who do not actively advance a paracinematic aesthetic. As Vale and Juno state broadly in their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*:

This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment. . . . Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they don't meet certain 'standards' utilized in evaluating direction, acting, dialogue, sets, continuity, technical cinematography, etc. Many of the films are overtly 'lower-class' or 'low-brow' in content and art direction.³³

³³ Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 4.

Vale and Juno go on to celebrate this cinema for its vitality and then identify what is at stake in this battle over the status of these films within the critical community. In a passage reminiscent of Bangs and Bourdieu, they state, 'At issue is the notion of 'good taste', which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation'.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid.

Style and excess

Graduate students entering the academy with an interest in trash cinema often wish to question why these 'areas of experience' have been 'judged and damned' by earlier scholars. But though they may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing such scandalous cultural artefacts, their heritage in a 'higher' taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical engagement of even the most abject 'low culture' forms. Gripsrud argues that 'egalitarian' attempts on the part of the culturally privileged to collapse differences between 'high' and 'low' culture, as noble as they might be, often ignore issues of 'access' to these two cultural realms. As Gripsrud writes, 'Some people have access to both high and low culture, but the majority has only access to the low one'.³⁵ Gripsrud describes high culture audiences that also consume popular cultural artefacts as having 'double access', and notes that this ability to participate in both cultural realms is not randomly distributed through society. As Gripsrud observes, 'The double access to the codes and practices of both high and low culture is a *class privilege*'.³⁶

³⁵ Gripsrud, 'High culture revisited', p. 199.

³⁶ Ibid.

The phenomenon of double access raises a number of interesting political issues concerning the trash aesthetic. For example, when Vale and Juno write that these films address 'unpopular – even radical – views' and 'assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality [and] violence', this does not mean that paracinema is a uniformly 'progressive' body of cinema. In fact, in subgenres ranging from the often rabidly xenophobic travelogues of the 'mondo' documentaries to the library of 1950s sex-loop star Betty Page, many paracinematic texts would run foul of academic film culture's political orthodoxy. But, of course, this is precisely why such films are so vociferously championed by certain segments of the paracinematic audience, which then attempts to 'redeem' the often suspect pleasures of these films

37 Such debates, in turn, should not instantly assume that there only exists an impoverished, 'single access' reading of these films within 'low culture', suggesting formations that are without irony. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that an audience of any historical moment or cinematic habitus ever watched Russ Meyer's odes to castration anxiety and breast fetishism with a 'straight' face.

through appeals to ironic detachment. Double access, then, foregrounds one of the central riddles of postmodern textuality: is the 'ironic' reading of a 'reactionary' text necessarily a 'progressive' act?³⁷

As pivotal as double access is in considering conventional debates over representational politics, the influence of high cultural capital is equally foregrounded in how the academy, the paracinematic audience, and the students who claim membership in both realms attend to the question of cinematic style. Of course, the ability to attend critically to a concept such as style, whether it manifests itself in Eisenstein or a Godzilla movie, is a class privilege, requiring a certain textual sophistication in issues of technique, form and structure. Though paracinematic viewers may explicitly reject the pretensions of high-brow cinema, their often sophisticated rhetoric on the issue of style can transform low-brow cinema into an object every bit as obtuse and inaccessible to the mainstream viewer as some of the most demanding works of the conventional avant garde. Both within the academy and the paracinematic community, viewers address the complex relationship between cinematic 'form' and 'content', often addressing style for style's sake. This is not to say, however, that the paracinematic community simply approaches trash cinema in the same terms that aesthetes and academics engage art cinema. There is, I would argue, a major political distinction between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinematic style, a distinction that is crucial to the paracinematic project of championing a counter-cinema of trash over that of the academy. In other words, though the paracinematic community may share with academic aesthetes an interest in counter-cinema as technical execution, their respective agendas and approaches in attending to questions of style and technique vary tremendously.

For example, film aesthetes, both in the academy and in the popular press, frequently discuss counter-cinematic style as a strategic intervention. In this scenario, the film artist self-consciously employs stylistic innovations to differentiate his or her (usually his) films from the cultural mainstream. James Monaco's discussion of the French New Wave is typical in this regard. 'It is this fascination with the forms and structures of the film medium . . . that sets their films apart from those that preceded them and marks a turning point in film history'.³⁸ Similarly, according to David Bordwell's concept of parametric narration, a filmmaker may systematically manipulate a certain stylistic parameter independent of the demands of the plot. Such films are rare and are typically produced by figures associated with 'art cinema' (Bordwell identifies Ozu, Bresson and Godard as among those having produced parametric films). The emphasis here is on applied manipulation of style as a form of systematic artistic experimentation and technical virtuosity. 'In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinct principles, just as a

38 James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

39 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 275.

40 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 11.

41 Ibid.

narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfills a musical logic.³⁹

Paracinematic films such as *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1972) and *She Devils on Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) rarely exhibit such pronounced stylistic virtuosity as the result of a 'conscious' artistic agenda. But this is not to say that issues of style and authorship are unimportant to the paracinematic community. However, rather than explore the systematic application of style as the elite techniques of a cinematic artist, paracinematic culture celebrates the systematic 'failure' or 'distortion' of conventional cinematic style by 'auteurs' who are valued more as 'eccentrics' than as artists, who work within the impoverished and clandestine production conditions typical of exploitation cinema. These films deviate from Hollywood classicism not necessarily by artistic intentionality, but by the effects of material poverty and technical ineptitude. As director Frank Henenlotter (of the *Basket Case* series) comments, 'Often, through bad direction, misdirection, inept direction, a film starts assuming surrealistic overtones, taking a dreadfully cliched story into new frontiers – you're sitting there shaking your head, totally excited, totally unable to guess where this is going to head next, or what the next loony line out of somebody's mouth is going to be. Just as long as it isn't stuff you regularly see.'⁴⁰ Importantly, paracinematic films are not ridiculed for this deviation but are instead celebrated as unique, courageous and ultimately subversive cinematic experiences. For this audience, paracinema thus constitutes a true counter-cinema in as much as 'it isn't stuff you regularly see', both in terms of form and content. Henenlotter continues, 'I'll never be satisfied until I see every sleazy film ever made – as long as it's different, as long as it's breaking a taboo (whether deliberately or by misdirection). There's a thousand reasons to like these films.'⁴¹

While the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically, paracinematic viewers value a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to *obey* dominant codes of cinematic representation. For this audience, the 'bad' is as aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating as the 'brilliant'. A manifesto on acting from *Zontar* further illustrates the aesthetic appeal of such stylistic deviation among this audience:

Transparent play-acting; mumbling incompetence; passionate scenery-chewing; frigid woodenness; barely disguised drunkenness or contempt for the script; – these are the secrets of Zontarian acting at its best. Rondo Hatton's exploited acromegalic condition; Acquanetta's immobile dialogue readings; the drunken John Agar frozen to his chair in *Curse of the Swamp Creature*; – these great performances loom massively as the ultimate classics of

ZONTARISM. These are not so much performances as revelations of Human truth. We are not 'entertained,' we rather sympathize with our suffering soul-mates on screen. These performances are not escapist fantasy, but a heavy injection of BADTRUTH.⁴²

⁴³ For an example of this literature, see Ado Kyrrou, 'The popular is marvelous', in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

The Zontarian moment of the 'badtruth' is not unlike the Surrealist notion of the 'marvellous' (and indeed, the Surrealists were perhaps the first cinephiles with an interest in bad cinema).⁴³ As with the marvellous, the badtruth, as a nodal point of paracinematic style, provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging the transcendently weird and the catastrophically awful. Thus, rather than witness the Surrealists' vision of the exquisite chance meetings of umbrellas and sewing machines on a dissecting table, the paracinematic viewer thrills instead to such equally fantastic fabrications as women forced to duel in a syringe fight in the basement of a schizophrenic vaudevillian who has only moments earlier eaten his cat's left eyeball (*Maniac!* [Dwain Esper, 1934]), Colonial era witches and warlocks crushed to death by men in Levis corduroys who hurl bouncing Styrofoam boulders (*Blood-Orgy of the She-Devils* [Ted V. Mikels, 1973]), a down and out Bela Lugosi training a mutant bat to attack people wearing a certain type of shaving lotion (*The Devil Bat* [Jean Yarborough, 1941]), and leaping, pulsating brains that use their prehensile spinal cords to strangle unwary soldiers and citizens on a Canadian rocket base (*Fiend Without a Face* [Arthur Crabtree, 1958]).

Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema. By concentrating on a film's formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity, the paracinematic audience, much like the viewer attuned to the innovations of Godard or capable of attending to the patterns of parametric narration described by Bordwell, foregrounds structures of cinematic discourse and artifice so that the material identity of the film ceases to be a structure made invisible in service of the diegesis, but becomes instead the primary focus of textual attention. It is in this respect that the paracinematic aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of 'excess'.

Kristin Thompson describes excess as a value that exists beyond a cinematic signifier's 'motivated' use, or, as 'those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces'.⁴⁴ 'At the point where motivation ends', Thompson writes, 'excess begins'.⁴⁵ '[T]he minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning. . . . Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film.'⁴⁶ Thompson writes of excess as an intermittent

⁴⁴ Kristin Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', p. 135.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

textual phenomenon, a brief moment of self-conscious materiality that interrupts an otherwise conventional, ‘non-excessive’ film: ‘Probably no one ever watches only these non-diegetic aspects of the image through an entire film.’ But, Thompson writes further, these non-diegetic aspects are nevertheless always present, ‘a whole “film” existing in some sense alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching’.⁴⁷

I would argue that the paracinematic audience is perhaps the one group of viewers that *does* concentrate exclusively on these ‘non-diegetic aspects of the image’ during the entire film, or at least attempts to do so. Like their counterparts in the academy, trash cinema fans, as active cinephiles practising an aesthetic founded on the recognition and subsequent rejection of Hollywood style, are extremely conscious of the cinema’s characteristic narrative forms and stylistic strategies. But, importantly, while cinematic aesthetes attend to style and excess as moments of artistic bravado in relation to the creation of an overall diegesis, paracinematic viewers instead use excess as a gateway to exploring profilmic and extratextual aspects of the filmic object itself. In other words, by concentrating so intently on ‘non-diegetic’ elements in these films, be they unconvincing special effects, blatant anachronisms, or histrionic acting, the paracinematic reading attempts to activate the ‘whole ‘film’ existing . . . alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching’. One could say that while academic attention to excess often foregrounds aesthetic strategies within the text as a closed formal system, paracinematic attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film’s failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms. It is here that the paracinematic audience most dramatically parts company with the aesthetes of academia. Whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text.

Paracinematic excess: Ed Wood, Jr and Larry Buchanan

Ed Wood, Jr’s status has long been high in the paracinematic community. Wood was an independent filmmaker in Hollywood during the 1950s, known primarily for his work with Bela Lugosi. His films are remarkably incompetent from a conventional perspective. Wood’s dialogue was often awful, his actors alternately wooden and histrionic, and his sets pathetic and threadbare. Throughout his long career as a filmmaker, Wood was unable (or unwilling) to master the basics of continuity, screen direction or the construction of cinematic space. His *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is perhaps the most famous

Obsolescence as
defamiliarization: an encounter
with 'aliens' in *Plan 9 from
Outer Space* (Ed Wood, Jr.
1959). Picture courtesy: The
Wisconsin Center for Film and
Theater Research



'badfilm' of all, having become badfilm's equivalent of *Citizen Kane* as an inventory of characteristically paracinematic stylistic devices. Though Wood's films were initially read as camp, the critical discourse within paracinematic literature surrounding Wood has since shifted from bemused derision to active celebration. No longer regarded as a hack, Wood is now seen, like Godard, as a unique talent improvising outside the constrictive environment of traditional Hollywood production and representation. As one fanzine comments, 'Wood's films are now appreciated less as models of incompetence, and more as the products of a uniquely personal and obsessive sensibility that best expresses itself through madly deconstructed narratives enacted by a gallery of grotesque castoffs from the fringes of Hollywood bohemia'.⁴⁸ This is certainly the perspective that dominates Tim Burton's cinematic treatment of Wood's career, *Ed Wood* (1994).

Wood's most notorious film and the movie that is central to his status as a paracinematic filmmaker is *Glen or Glenda*. As detailed extensively in Burton's biopic, Wood shot *Glen or Glenda* in 1953 to capitalize on the public hysteria surrounding the Christine Jorgenson sex-change operation. Also released under the titles *I Led Two Lives* and *I Changed My Sex*, the film purports to be an investigative examination of the sex-change issue. Instead, the film is an odd plea for public tolerance of transvestitism. The film's protagonist is a young man named Glen, a transvestite struggling with the decision of whether or not to tell his fiancée of his secret before their marriage. From this central conflict, Wood fashions a vertiginous film that in a bizarre and at times hallucinatory manner argues the virtues of transvestitism, giddily shifting from documentary to horror film, from police drama to sexploitation picture. In the midst of this generic turmoil, Bela Lugosi appears from time to time as a metanarrational

⁴⁸ Zontar, no. 8, n.p.

figure who punctuates the diegetic action with incomprehensible comments and bizarre non sequiturs.

A casebook example of stylistic deviation as the result of the unique conditions of production in exploitation cinema, *Glen or Glenda* is of particular interest for paracinematic viewers because of the extratextual identity of Ed Wood, Jr: Wood was himself a transvestite. He not only wrote and directed *Glen or Glenda*, but also starred as the troubled young transvestite, Glen. Fan legends (based on interviews with surviving crew members) have it that Wood directed most of the film while wearing his favourite chiffon housecoat and that he had an obsession with cashmere sweaters (a fetish dramatically enacted in the film's final scene). After his movie career ended in the 1960s, Wood went on to write a number of adult novels with transvestite storylines.⁴⁹

This extratextual information about Wood is key to the paracinematic positioning of his films as a form of counter-cinema. Knowing this information allows the paracinematic fan to more fully appreciate the complexity of the cultural codes at work in a film like *Glen or Glenda*. John Fiske argues that the cultural elite 'use information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work'. Within fan culture, on the other hand, 'such knowledge increases the power of the fan to "see through" to the production processes normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan'.⁵⁰ In the case of Ed Wood, Jr, the paracinematic aesthetic combines an elite interest in 'enriched appreciation' with a popular interest in seeing through 'production processes'. Paracinematic fans use their knowledge of Wood's real life to 'enhance or enrich' their engagement in his films, much as elites use their knowledge of Godard's various positions in relation to Marxism to inform their viewings. Vital to paracinematic pleasure, however, is this process of 'seeing through' the diegesis. For a sophisticated paracinematic viewer, *Glen or Glenda* is compelling because it seemingly presents both the textual and extratextual struggles of a man set against the repressive constraints of 1950s sexuality, encoded in a style that also challenges the period's conventions of representation. Paracinematic fans appreciate films such as *Glen or Glenda* not only as bizarre works of art, but as intriguing cultural documents, as socially and historically specific instances of artifice and commentary. Set against the bland cultural miasma of the Eisenhower years, Wood and his film stand out as truly remarkable figures.

This interest in collapsing the textual and the extratextual, the filmic and the profilmic, is especially pronounced in Zontarian interest in Larry Buchanan, a Dallas filmmaker who made a number of AIP films for television in the mid sixties. Buchanan's films rank among the most low-budget productions ever attempted in commercial filmmaking. Often following scripts from old black and white features, these films were reshot in colour for the television market in two or

⁴⁹ For a more complete biography of Wood, see Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: the Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1992).

⁵⁰ Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 24.

three days for often less than a few thousand dollars. The finished products are a test of even the most dedicated paracinematic viewer's patience. With no money or time to reshoot, mistakes in dialogue, camera movement and sound recording remain in each film. The films are unwatchable for most mainstream viewers, and consequently have assumed an exalted status among the 'hardcore' badfilm faction of paracinematic culture.

As with the other visionary stylists in paracinema's shadow realm of autuerism, Buchanan is valorized for his unique artistic vision. *Zontar* positions Buchanan as a poor man's Carl Dreyer, celebrating his particularly bleak and sombre approach. Importantly, however, this bleak and sombre tone is as much a function of the conditions of production as the product of Buchanan's 'genius'. A common strategy when discussing Buchanan is to transform his films into profilmic parables of artistic tragedy. Differentiating Buchanan from the more accessible Ed Wood, Jr, for example, *Zontar*'s editors write, 'where Ed Wood's films ultimately reassure the comfortably "hip" viewer of the dynamic force of even the most downtrodden and despised corners of human experience, the films of Larry Buchanan can only induce a profound feeling of desperation, anxiety and terminal boredom. The texture is not that of a tatty side-show, but that of the endless despair and futility of human existence as reflected on the concrete pavement of a Dallas parking lot.'⁵¹ The Zontarian transformation of Buchanan's work thus shifts the diegetic frame so that the action on the screen becomes but the trace of an isolated moment of desperate human activity, a farcical attempt at 'art' taking place on a particular day many years ago in someone's garage, on a Dallas parking lot.

A contributor to *Zontar* describes this moment of profilmic nausea as personally experienced in the climatic revelation of the monster in the concluding scenes of Buchanan's *Curse of the Swamp Creature*:

Seldom, if ever, has a more disappointing final monster revelation scene been filmed. . . . The monster is unbelievably, spectacularly cheap. . . . 'It' appears dressed in a white hospital smock, with rubber monster-gloves and a minimal mask-piece consisting of two painted PING-PONG BALL EYES set into a rubber bow. A skin-head wig and a couple of cruddy fangs complete the 'monster suit' . . . which is more embarrassing than scary . . . the CREATURE itself must be the least convincing creation in monster movie history. This is, of course, a subjective area, but I would rate it far worse than the ROBOT MONSTER and at least as bad as the CREEPING TERROR . . . though of a different order, naturally. THE MASTER DIRECTOR actually compounds the failure of his creature by withholding it for so long. By building to his epic anti-climax Buchanan makes the SWAMP CREATURE itself the essence of disappointment and failure . . . translated into cheap

51 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

rubber and ping-pong ball eyes. The SWAMP CREATURE'S scaly rubber fright-mask is composed of the very substance of despair.⁵²

The swamp creature, intended to be a startling and menacing cinematic revelation, is, in the last analysis, simply an overweight actor standing in weeds with ping-pong balls attached to his eyes on a hot day in Dallas in 1966. For the paracinematic community, such moments of impoverished excess are a means toward collapsing cinema's fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama. The 'surface' diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context.

The politics of excess

Thompson argues that the importance of excess is that it renews 'the perceptual freshness of the work' and 'suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film'.

The viewer is no longer caught in the bind of mistaking the causal structure of the narrative for some sort of inevitable, true, or natural set of events which is beyond questioning or criticism. . . . Once narrative is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer.⁵³

⁵³ Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', pp. 140–1.

Excess provides a freedom from constraint, an opportunity to approach a film with a fresh and slightly defamiliarized perspective. As Thompson argues, through excess 'the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects'.⁵⁴ What the critical viewer does with this newfound freedom provided by the phenomenon of excess is, I would argue, a political question, and one that lies at the heart of the conflict between the counter-cinema of the academy and that promoted by paracinematic culture. The very concept of excess, after all, as a relativistic term that posits a self-evident 'norm', is an inherently political evaluation. Exploring these politics of excess presents a key area where students who possess a trash aesthetic may impact the academic institutions to which they belong by questioning the goals, strategies and techniques of academically enshrined versions of 'art' cinema and the 'avant garde'.

Specifically, the trash aesthetic offers a potential critique of two highly influential methodologies in film studies: neoformalist analysis and theories of 'radical' textuality. Paracinema suggests that the

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

neoformalist emphasis on art as defamiliarization might be more complicated than the cataloguing of innovative, text-bound 'devices'. If the paracinematic community celebrates a film, either earnestly or parodically, as an invigorating artistic experience precisely because of its utter banality, does that constitute a form of defamiliarization? For whom and under what circumstances is any film defamiliarizing? Since any notion of aesthetics is inextricably linked to historical issues of representation and reception, what are the politics of a neoformalist analysis that ultimately constructs a hierarchy of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' audiences, artistic and non-artistic films? (Do we really want to claim that *Last Year at Marienbad* is somehow more 'artistic' than *Sweet Badass's Badass Song* or even *E.T.*? What exactly is the purpose of such aesthetic valuations other than to empower a certain critic or a certain cinema?) If nothing else, the trash aesthetic serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications.

Paracinema also offers a critique of the 'radical' aesthetic that seeks to liberate, or at least politically agitate, audiences through the application of disruptive textual devices, a project that coalesced in theoretical and critical writings in film studies during the 1970s and which continues to inform much work on avant-garde textuality. In many respects, paracinematic discourses on excess greatly resemble the symptomatic criticism so central to film studies during this formative period. As with the devotees of Sirk, Minnelli and Lewis, paracinematic viewers are interested in reading films 'against the grain', ever on the alert for the trash film equivalents of Comolli and Narboni's celebrated 'category e' films.⁵⁵ And, as in the counter-cinemas explicitly designed by Godard or covertly implanted by Sirk, paracinema's retrospective reconstruction of an avant garde through the ironic engagement of exploitation cinema's history is a 'politicized' cinema to the extent that it demonstrates the limitations and interests of dominant cinematic style by providing a striking counter-example of deviation.⁵⁶

But while segments of academic film culture often appeal to a refined code of aesthetics to apprehend and explain the potentially disruptive forces of style and excess (an aesthetics most often intentionally applied by an 'artist' to be successfully decoded by an elite cinephile in a rarefied and exclusive circuit of textual exchange), paracinematic culture celebrates excess as a product of cultural as well as aesthetic deviance. Once excess cues the elite viewer to the arbitrary structure of a narrative, he or she can then study the 'perceptual field of structures' in the work itself in appreciation of artistic craftsmanship within a closed formal system. The paracinematic viewer's recognition of a narrative's artifice, however, is the first step in examining a field of structures within the culture as a whole, a passageway into engaging a larger field of contextual issues

⁵⁵ See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/ideology/criticism, Part I', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1971), pp. 27–36.

⁵⁶ In Wollen's account of Godard's significance as a radical filmmaker, he identifies 'seven cardinal virtues' of Godard's aesthetic that oppose the 'seven deadly sins' of orthodox cinema. Godard's counter-cinema is thus argued to feature 'narrative intransitivity' rather than 'narrative transitivity' – 'estrangement vs identification, foregrounding vs transparency, multiple diegesis vs single diegesis, aperture vs closure, un-pleasure vs pleasure, and reality vs fiction'. One cannot help but be struck by how certain paracinematic titles, especially genre hybrids like *Glen or Glenda*, match Wollen's criteria point by point. For a more complete account of these distinctions, see Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*'.

surrounding the film as a socially and historically specific document. As a consequence, paracinema might be said to succeed where earlier more 'radical' avant gardes have failed. It is doubtful that *Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard / Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1973), or *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) for that matter, ever 'radicalized' anyone other than fellow academy aesthetes. Perhaps paracinema has the potential, at long last, to answer Brecht's famous call for an anti-illusionist aesthetic by presenting a cinema so histrionic, anachronistic and excessive that it compels even the most casual viewer to engage it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation. In this respect, one might argue that while academy icons such as Godard and Sirk may have employed complex aesthetic strategies to problematize issues such as the construction of gender, Ed Wood Jr, by his own admission, actually fought in the Pacific during World War II with a pink bra and knickers worn underneath his combat fatigues. As to which form of political engagement and subsequent critical promotion by the academy will prove more provocative and productive, it is open for debate.

The untamed eye: surrealism and film theory

RAMONA FOTIADE

The aesthetics of film developed by Surrealists through their critical writings, and partly illustrated through an important number of scenarios and a relatively small corpus of films, concentrates on the essentially visual nature of the medium and reflects the influence of avant-garde painting and of early experiments in photography. During the first two decades, cinema attracted the artists rather than the writers of the Dada and Surrealist groups: Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Raoul Haussman, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter. Many of them had already experimented with collages, Dada or Surrealist objects, like Duchamp's controversial use of 'ready-made' objects as 'works of art', and, later, his 'roto-reliefs', which anticipated his experiment with optics and cinematic movement in *Anémic Cinéma* (1926). Surrealism tried to separate its own approach to cinema from Dada experiments, and found its distinctive theoretical basis in André Breton's article 'Surrealism and painting', which set the emphasis on the figure of the 'untamed eye' and the visual nature of the medium subsequently taken on by the other Surrealists.

The eye exists in an untamed state. It presides over the conventional exchange of signals apparently required by the navigation of the mind. But who will draw up the scale of vision? There exists what I have seen many times. . . . There exists also what I am beginning to see that is not visible.¹

An art of desire, of illusion, but also a medium of the greatest evocative power in terms of concrete details, cinema offered the

¹ André Breton, 'Le Surréalisme et la peinture', first published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4 (15 July 1925), pp. 26–30; and no. 6 (1 March 1926), pp. 30–32; and reprinted as a book in 1928. The fragment, in English, is quoted from J. H. Matthews, *Surrealism and Film* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), p. 12.

2 René Gardies, 'Le Cinéma est-il surréaliste?' in *Europe*, nos 475–6, special issue 'Surréalisme' (1968), p. 152.

3 Louis Aragon, 'Du Décor', in *Le Film*, no. 131 (16 September 1918), pp. 9–10; and translated as 'On Decor' in Paul Hammond (trans. and ed.), *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writing on the Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), pp. 28–31.

4 André Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', in *L'Âge du cinéma*, nos. 4–5 (1951), pp. 26–30. Fragment translated in Matthews, *Surrealism and Film*, p. 2.

5 Louis Aragon referred to this verse from Mallarmé's 'Salut' in his article 'On Decor' in Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and its Shadow*, p. 31.

6 'I agreed particularly well with Jacques Vaché in appreciating nothing so much as dropping in at a movie house when what was playing was playing, at any point in the show. And we would leave at the first sign of boredom – or surfeit – to rush off to another movie house where we behaved in the same way, and so on'. André Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', quoted in Matthews, *Surrealism and Film*, p. 1.

'privileged instrument for de-realizing the world' (*déréalisation du monde*), and the means for an alchemical 'transmutation of reality'.² The visual essence of cinema held the promise of a miraculous, non-verbal language that announced 'a new, audacious aesthetic, a sense of modern beauty'.³ This is the direction in which Breton and the Surrealist avant garde evolved, seeking modern rituals and mythologies in the magical, illusory space between the projector and the screen. Moviegoers become, in this perspective, believers of a new cult, worshipping the super-reality and 'super-disorientation' (*sur-dépaysement*) of film:

There is a way of going to the movies as others go to church and I think that, from a certain angle, quite independently of what is playing, it is there that the only absolutely modern mystery is celebrated.⁴

Breton's call for the abolition of artificial boundaries between what we see and what we only begin to see, or have never seen before, stimulated the Surrealist investigation of the miraculous potential of the cinema in this direction of the *unseen*, the *unknown*. Suggestions of inspired or visionary 'blindness', as well as comments on the 'white awareness of our canvas'⁵ (the modern cinematographic screen), indicate the Surrealists' predominant concern with processes of visual perception and imagination. As I shall try to argue, the Surrealist exploration of dreams, of visual and imaginary processes in the cinema, uncovers an ambivalent relationship to competing avant-garde theories and practices of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the abstract and the Impressionist cinema. Surrealism appropriated specific abstract works or artists, or particular Impressionist techniques, while, at the same time, trying to promote its own singular conception of cinema.

What situates Surrealist commentaries on film within contemporary debates is the insistence on the ability offered by the new medium to 'visualize dreams', to bridge reality and imagination. Cinema had a strong formative influence on the movement, as Breton acknowledged in *Comme dans un bois* (1951), in which he evokes his decisive encounter with Jacques Vaché by referring to their 'chance encounters' with the cinema and their shared fascination with the 'estrangement' (*dépaysement*) that film could create.⁶ Even before the existence of a Surrealist group, Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon and Robert Desnos published articles in which they expressed a common understanding of films in their relationship to dreams, to 'visions' appealing more to the imagination than to the sights with which the spectator's eye is familiar, and which she/he expects to see. The stress placed on the role of the *eye* and the ability to see beyond everyday reality is very early present in Surrealist writings, as for example in this fragment from 'Note 1 on the Cinema' by Soupault, which was published in 1918:

One day on an empty lot in Vincennes, before an assembled crowd of idlers, an individual named Pathé presented a cinematograph invented by the Lumière brothers: man was endowed with a new eye. After that, those who worked busily with this extraordinary invention deceived themselves terribly; they made the cinema the colourless mirror and mute echo of the theatre. No one has stopped making this mistake. However, since the means that the cinema makes available to the artist are quite different from those of the theatre, it's important to establish a difference between the screen and the stage, to *separate cinematographic art from theatrical art*.⁷

In search for revolutionary new means of communicating experiences that transgress the conventional barriers between perception and imagination, virtuality and actuality, Surrealists credited 'cinematographic art' with a miraculously accurate ability to express the nonverbal, visual unfolding of dreams. Soupault's retrospective account of the 'birth of Surrealism' does not hesitate to relate the foremost aspiration of the movement – that is, the superimposition of dreams and everyday reality – to the crucial influence of cinema, and its new visual language:

The cinema was for us an immense discovery at the moment when we were elaborating Surrealism . . . we then considered the film as a marvellous mode of expressing dreams . . . we thought the film would propose extraordinary possibilities for expressing, transfiguring, and realizing dreams. One can say that, from the birth of Surrealism, we sought to discover, thanks to the cinema, the means for expressing the immense power of the dream.⁸

The Surrealists' conception of cinema, which envisaged the possibility of expressing and 'realizing' dreams through 'cinematographic language', was adopted by other film critics of the time. Paul Romain, for example, talked about the identical nature of dreams and cinema, and referred back to Sigmund Freud's remark that dreams remain 'untranslatable in words, [and] can only be expressed by means of images'.⁹ He even went so far as to say that 'all the expressive and visual processes of the cinema are found in dream. . . . The simultaneity of actions, soft-focus images, dissolves, super-impositions, distortion, the doubling of images, slow motion.'¹⁰ Similarly, Jean Goudal, who was one of the first commentators on Surrealism in relation to cinema, wrote in 1925 that the 'cinematographic' image represented 'a conscious hallucination, and utilizes this fusion of dream and consciousness which Surrealism would like to see realized in the literary domain'.¹¹ Goudal's pertinent critique, which Breton mentioned in his own retrospective presentation of Surrealist cinema (*Comme dans un bois*), attempted to show that the search for a new, nonverbal language which dominated the early days of the movement, was actually accomplished in the discovery of

7 Philippe Soupault, 'Note 1 sur le cinéma', *SIC*, no. 25 (January 1918); quoted in English from Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 142–3. Emphasis mine.

8 Jean-Marie Mabire, 'Entretien avec Philippe Soupault', in *Études cinématographiques*, nos. 38–9, special issue 'Surréalisme et cinéma' (1965), p. 29.

9 Paul Romain, 'L'Influence du rêve sur le cinéma', *Ciné-Ciné-pour-tous*, no. 40 (1 July 1925), p. 8; translated in Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 362–3.

10 Ibid., p. 363.

11 See Jean Goudal, 'Surréalisme et cinéma', *La Revue hebdomadaire* (February 1925), pp. 343–57; quoted in English from Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and its Shadow*, pp. 49–56.

the 'camera-eye' and the free syntax of film. Any objections that could be made to Surrealism, as Goudal argued, disappear once they are related to the domain of cinema, where the movement seemed to have found its ideal illustration:

Applied to the technique of the cinema the correctness and fecundity of the Surrealist thesis is all the more striking. The objection to method (the difficulty of uniting the conscious and the unconscious on the same plane) does not hold for cinema, in which the thing seen corresponds exactly to a conscious hallucination. . . . Though the complete repudiation of logic is forbidden language, which is born of this logic, the cinema can indulge itself in such repudiation without contravening any ineluctable internal necessity.¹²

12 Ibid.

The conscious hallucination brought about by the rapid succession of film images surpasses the similar hallucinatory state obtained through automatic speech and automatic writing insofar as the repudiation of logic can be more convincingly achieved in a purely visual medium, freed from the constraints of spoken or written language.

It is important to note, however, that this emphasis on the visual nature of film also characterized the earlier experiments of abstract cinema, and some of the films and theoretical writings related to Impressionist cinema. Even before the emergence of the Surrealist movement, and the attempt to bring cinema, as a purely visual art, within the area of Surrealist explorations of dreams and of unconscious processes, filmmakers such as Richter and Eggeling uncovered ingenious modalities for the exploration of visual and musical rhythm through film images. Richter's series of *Rhythmus* (21, 23, 25) and Eggeling's suggestively entitled *Diagonal Symphony* stimulated similar experiments in France, where Jean Epstein and Fernand Léger became the promoters of abstract cinema, and had a decisive influence, in their turn, on the generation of Impressionist filmmakers like Louis Delluc and Germaine Dulac. The autonomy or the prevalence of visual composition and rhythm over content or logical narration inspired such Impressionist notions as 'photogénie', introduced by Delluc, and 'cinégraphie', Dulac's term, which referred to the privileged role assigned to placement, duration and interrelation of film images.

In their search for a pure 'cinematographic' language, Surrealists carefully distinguished themselves from abstract cinema, of which Antonin Artaud (among others) was highly critical. Artaud in 1927 argued that one cannot be moved by 'geometrical lines':

For although the mind of man may be able to conceive and accept abstraction, no one can respond to purely geometric lines which possess no significative value in themselves and which are not related to any sensation that the eye of the screen can recognize or classify.¹³

13 Antonin Artaud, 'Cinéma et réalité', in *Oeuvres complètes* vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1961), p. 22; trans. Helen Weaver, in Susan Sontag (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 150.

14 See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Dada/Cinema?', in Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1987), pp. 13–27; Mimi White, 'Two French Dada Films: *Entr'acte* and *Emak Bakia*', *Dada/Surrealism*, vol. 13 (1984), pp. 37–47.

15 Elsaesser, 'Dada/Cinema?'.

However, the surprising appropriation by the Surrealist movement of films directly related to experiments in abstract cinema suggests a more ambiguous, less radical attitude to this competing avant-garde strand of early French cinema. Although Surrealism never adopted Léger's well-known *Ballet mécanique* as one of the films which anticipated the movement, the *Short Dictionary of Surrealism* (*Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*), published in 1938, included two films which illustrate Léger's use of the 'mechanical period': Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* and Man Ray's *Emak Bakia*, both made in 1926. Recent film critics¹⁴ do not hesitate to describe Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, along with Duchamp's and Man Ray's films, as Dada or abstract experiments, without even trying to elucidate the question of their inclusion in a list of supposedly 'Surrealist' films. The so-called 'question of attribution and contribution' (addressed by Thomas Elsaesser)¹⁵ is far from clear in any of the above mentioned cases, and needs to be related to the specific historical context in which the various avant-garde programmes (Dada, Surrealist, or abstract cinema) struggled to impose their supremacy in the area of non-commercial, experimental filmmaking.

The appropriation of Man Ray's and Duchamp's films by the Surrealists was motivated by various reasons which had to do not so much with a shared conception of cinematic language, than with the absence of truly representative Surrealist productions. The most likely candidates for the title included Dulac's *La Coquille et le Clergyman/The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) (which was not, after all, included in the *Short Dictionary of Surrealism* among the 'representative' Surrealist productions), Man Ray's later film based on a scenario by Desnos, *L'Étoile de mer* (1928), and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1928) and *L'Âge d'Or* (1930). It is significant to recall here that Man Ray, retrospectively in 1965, acknowledged that his early experiments with film were a possibility of extending his work in photography, preferring the static medium to the moving image:

All the films I made were improvisations. I did not write scenarios. It was automatic cinema. . . . My intention was to put the photographic composition that I made into motion. As far as the camera is concerned, it serves me to fix something which I do not want to paint. But it does not interest me to make 'beautiful photography' in cinema. Principally, I do not like so much things that move.¹⁶

16 Man Ray, 'Témoignages', in *Études cinématographiques*, nos. 38–9, p. 43; quoted in English from Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*, p. 3.

This baffling remark suggests that Man Ray's approach to film was very similar to Duchamp's experiments with optics and movement (which began with his famous *Nude Descending a Staircase*). From 1920 to 1926 Man Ray and Duchamp collaborated on various projects which anticipated their interest in the spatial rather than temporal dimension of film image. The two of them explored, for example, the possibility of creating the illusion of three-dimensionality by rotating

17 Elsaesser, 'Dada/Cinéma?', p. 24.

18 Duchamp quoted in Elsaesser, 'Dada/Cinéma?', p. 26.

19 'On some strips I sprinkled salt and pepper, like a cook preparing a roast, on other strips I threw pins and thumbtacks at random; then I turned on the white light for a second or two, as I had done for my still Rayographs'. Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 260. This ridiculously anachronistic approach remains inexplicable, unless one relates it to the author's continued commitment to photography and optics, rather than film.

plates or disks with two-dimensional geometric designs. This resulted in the so-called *Rotary Glass Plates* (*Precision Optics*) (1920), and *Rotary Demisphere* (*Precision Optics*) (1925). Man Ray actually participated in the production of Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma*, which does not really cross the boundary between the rotary glass plates experiments and cinematic movement. The rotating disks with spiral lines alternate in a slow rhythm with disks containing spirally printed verbal puns. As Elsaesser remarks, the technique developed by Duchamp involved the synchronization of two machines: the recording camera and the revolving motor that spins the discs.¹⁷ However, what needs to be added to this remark is that the film camera functions here more like a photographic, static recording mechanism, and the movement remains confined to the repetitive pattern of the revolving disks. Duchamp, like Man Ray in his early work, ignores the nature and possibilities of cinematic movement, and replaces what could be called the temporal image with an obsessional, circular space of simulated motion. Both artists seem to promote a detached contemplation of images as photographic or abstract painted compositions to which movement is added either in Léger's mechanistic manner or as a purely stylistic device that did not match the expectations of Surrealist artists. Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* is usually considered to be a Dada film, although the author himself refrained from calling it a film at all: 'I would regret it – he said – if anyone saw in this . . . anything other than "optics"'.¹⁸ Man Ray's first film, *Retour à la raison* (1923) also remained within the limits of an attempted kinetic extension of his photographic compositions, not far from Richter's or Eggeling's improvisations with visual rhythm and geometric figures. *Retour à la raison* was put together in one night for Tristan Tzara's '*Soirée du coeur à barbe*', the last Dada manifestation in Paris: a manifestation which was interrupted by Breton, and marked the final rift between the two leaders of the French artistic avant garde. Man Ray's reluctance, or even his inability, to see the difference between 'photography put into motion' and film was never so obvious. It is surprising to note that although most cinematic techniques had been explored by 1923 Man Ray made *Retour à la raison* partly without a camera, by applying his technique of the Rayograph to the film celluloid.¹⁹

After Tzara's last attempt to revive Dada at the '*Soirée du Coeur à Barbe*', Man Ray set out to make what he thought would be a Surrealist film. His affiliation to the movement dates back to 1925, the year following the publication of the First Surrealist Manifesto, when he participated in the Surrealist exposition. In 1926, Man Ray had a one-man show at the *Galérie Surréaliste*. The same year he made *Emak Bakia*, which, despite its later inclusion in Breton's list of Surrealist films, was first rejected by the members of the movement. According to Man Ray's own retrospective account, this negative reaction was simply due to '[his] not having discussed the project with

20 Ibid., p. 274.

21 Ibid.

them beforehand'. 'It was not sufficient to call a work Surrealist', Man Ray recalls, 'One had to collaborate closely and obtain a stamp of approval. . . . I had neglected this, been somewhat too individualistic.'²⁰ Nevertheless, he was quite surprised by his friends' rejection, because he had apparently tried 'to comply with all the principles of Surrealism' in *Emak Bakia*: 'irrationality, automatism, psychological and dramatic sequences without apparent logic, and complete disregard for conventional storytelling'.²¹ What Man Ray failed to notice was the incompatibility between the repetitive, mechanic aesthetic which animated early experiments with abstract film, and the Surrealist understanding of the 'miraculous' of everyday life situations (*le merveilleux quotidien*), and of the alienating effect (*dépaysement*) of images grounded in otherwise familiar, recognizable surroundings.

A more playful, inventive approach to film characterizes Picabia's and René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), which, unlike Léger's *Ballet mécanique* or Man Ray's *Emak Bakia*, is based on a series of humorous gags, loosely connected within narrative sequences. The film was shown during the intermission of Picabia's 'Instantanist' ballet, *Relâche*. The 'Instantanist' movement was explicitly directed against Breton's group, whose manifesto had been published only two months before the performance of the ballet and the film. Considering Picabia's strong statement against Breton in his answer to the Surrealist manifesto,²² one wonders why the film was after all included alongside *Emak Bakia* in the list of Surrealist films published in the *Short Dictionary of Surrealism*. The critics usually consider *Entr'acte* as a Dada film, although Picabia and the actors participating in the performance (Duchamp, Man Ray, Eric Satie, and the members of the Ballet Suédois) were not affiliated to Tzara's group.

The understanding of representability and vision in film seems to provide the only conclusive criteria for qualifying abstract films as either Dada or Surrealist. One could say that the so-called Dada films not only break the cinematic illusion by constantly pointing at the mechanical, technical side of film production (the discontinuity and static or repetitive character of images behind the apparent continuity), but also represent empirical reality as half-abstract, as a simulacrum or an illusion in itself. The undermining of the illusion of movement in film is coupled with an undermining of what seems to be the illusion at work in normal, real life, processes of perception and representation. *Emak Bakia*, like the other Dada-related films, ultimately tends to show, as Mimi White remarks, that 'perception and recognition are more "abstract" than we think'.²³ In fact, what needs to be said about the production of abstract films, related or not to Dada, is that they share a rudimentary understanding of movement in terms of purely intellectual analysis and mechanical reproduction which applies not only to the camera (as source of the illusion of movement in film image), but also to the perceiving subject,

22 'André Breton is not a revolutionary . . . he is an arriviste . . . he has nothing to say; having no sensibility, never having lived, this artist is the type of petit bourgeois who loves little collections of painting.' Picabia, 'Poissons volants', *L'Ère nouvelle*, no. 24 (1924), p. 3; quoted from William Camfield, *Francis Picabia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 208.

23 White, 'Two French Dada Films: *Entr'acte* and *Emak Bakia*', p. 46.

considered as a highly complex apparatus in itself and as a source of illusion. This mechanistic conception of mental processes is radically opposed to the role assigned by Surrealism to imagination in the constant interaction between dream and reality, which makes the subject a real being in the world insofar as its vision constitutes a real order of things rather than a mere simulacrum. From this point of view, *Emak Bakia*, like *Entr'acte*, does not attempt to use the machinery of cinema in order to suggest the presence or the direct manifestation of an alternative order of things, centred on the perceiving subject, but rather reinforces the type of representation – illusion, simulacrum – corresponding to the mechanical reproduction of movement.

It was both the 'pure' or abstract cinema and the aestheticist tendencies – as illustrated by Jean Cocteau and Marcel L'Herbier – that Surrealists most strongly opposed and from which they dissociated themselves on various occasions. One famous example is Desnos's article 'Avant garde and cinema', where he spells out the objections brought by Surrealists to filmmakers like Cocteau, who were apparently very close to the spirit of the movement.

An exaggerated respect for art and a mystique of expression has led a whole group of producers, actors, and spectators to the creation of a so-called avant garde, remarkable for the rapidity with which its productions become obsolete, for its absence of human emotion, and for the risks it obliges the cinema to run. . . . Technical processes not solicited by the action, conventional acting, and the pretence of expressing the arbitrary and complicated movements of the soul are the principal characteristics of this kind of cinema, which I prefer to call 'hair in the soup' cinema.²⁴

In contrasting Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* and Buñuel's and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou*, for example, one has to admit that the latter relies on a 'recognizable' reality within which it explodes conventions and artificial boundaries with the imaginary. Neither the 'First Avant Garde'²⁵ or the 'abstract cinema' ever satisfied or came to identify completely with the Surrealist programme. In the case of the 'first' or the 'Impressionist' avant garde – including filmmakers like Abel Gance, L'Herbier, Delluc, Dulac – the interest in technical innovations and in the autonomy of the visual 'language' of cinema went along with an affiliation to Impressionist painting, Impressionist music,²⁶ or to the psychological novel. It is true that the members of the Surrealist group related more frequently, and, apparently, accepted more easily, associations with this Impressionist direction than with the abstract cinema. However, the Impressionist school certainly did not involve a radical rejection of the art object as such, neither did it start from the premise of an absolute autonomy of the cinema, in order to explore the possibility of a totally new, different visual language. As Ado Kyrrou suggests,²⁷ the role of the Impressionist school was more that of

²⁴ Robert Desnos, 'Cinéma d'avant-garde', in *Documents 7* (December 1929); quoted in English from Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and its Shadow*, pp. 36–8.

²⁵ Richard Abel, *French Cinema. The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 279.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ado Kyrrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1963), pp. 28–31.

establishing a language of modernity in the medium of film. He considered filmmakers like Delluc and Dulac as part of a generation which did not attempt to break the literary tradition or to use the technical innovations in order to achieve new revolutionary meaning or to approach new subjects and genres. Delluc, for example, according to Kyrrou, developed a new artistic language with reference to literary theories, that is to say, by seeking support in 'anti-cinematographic' means of expression. The other prominent representative of the Impressionist school, Dulac, defined this trend in terms of 'psychological film' and 'subjective cinema'. Although she insisted on the flexibility of silent film in contrast to the theatre and 'the syntax regulating writing and speech', she ended up proposing a visual 'rhetoric' which challenged neither the presuppositions of the psychological drama nor the formal regularities and logical structure of the narrative:

The shot is the image in its most isolated expressive form, underscored by the lens's framing. . . . The shot simultaneously defines the place, an action, and a thought. Each different image that is juxtaposed is called a shot. The shot is a small piece of the drama; it is a small touch that unites in a conclusion. . . . It is the only means that we have to create a bit of the inner life in the midst of the action.²⁸

²⁸ Germaine Dulac, 'The expressive techniques of the cinema', in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*, p. 309.

The inner life disclosed by the shot was supposed to be not only intelligible and coherent (defined in terms of a single 'thought'), but also inherent to every other similar unit of meaning juxtaposed in a continuum ('drama'), a succession of images that ultimately 'unites in a conclusion'. This understanding of the process of thought, and of individual psychology in relation to film, was in every way opposed to the approach of Surrealist filmmakers, and especially to the extreme, peculiar conception developed by Artaud. The contrast between the Impressionist school and the Surrealist avant garde comes out most strikingly from the fiery debates surrounding the making of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (directed by Dulac, and based on Artaud's scenario).

Critics hesitated for a long time to call *The Seashell and the Clergyman* a Surrealist film, partly because of the dispute between the writer and the director, which determined the Surrealists to interfere during the first screening, and partly because, oddly enough, the film was not included in the list of Surrealist productions. Nowadays, there is a general consensus about calling *The Seashell and the Clergyman* the first Surrealist film. Artaud himself thought of it this way, despite his initial disappointment with the result of his collaboration with Dulac. The controversy between the two started with the unexpected exclusion of the author of the script first from the shooting of the film, and then from the processing. Dulac, the director in charge of the

- ²⁹ This note preceded Artaud's article, 'Le Cinéma et l'Abstraction', published in *Le Monde Illustré*, no. 3645 (29 October 1927). See Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes* vol. III, pp. 313–14.
- ³⁰ Anonymous, 'Un rêve à l'écran', *Cinégraphie*, no. 2 (15 October 1927), p. 32; quoted in English from Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'The image and the spark: Dulac and Artaud reviewed', in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, p. 110.
- ³¹ Artaud, 'Sorcellerie et cinéma', in *Oeuvres complètes* vol. III, p. 81. For a commentary on Artaud's apparently ambiguous position in relation to the part played by dreams in the conception of film scenarios, see Alain et Odette Virmaux, *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1976), pp. 28–30, 42–9.
- ³² Artaud, 'La Coquille et le Clergyman', *Cahiers de Belgique*, no. 8 (October 1928); reproduced in *Oeuvres complètes* vol. III, pp. 77–8.
- ³³ Artaud, 'Le Mauvais Rêveur', *Le Disque Vert*, no. 3 (1925); reproduced in *Oeuvres complètes* vol. III, p. 224. Against the opinion held by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, I would like to argue here that Artaud's dissatisfaction with Dulac's interpretation of his scenario was actually grounded in a radically different conception of cinema, which challenged the notions of representation, dream and illusion applied to film image. For Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's account of the Dulac–Artaud debate see: 'Theorizing "Feminine": Woman as the figure of desire in *The Seashell and the Clergyman*', *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1984), pp. 32–9; 'The image and the spark: Dulac and Artaud reviewed', in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, pp. 110–27; 'From fantasy to structure of the fantasm: *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and *The Seashell and the Clergyman* in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 98–140.

project, perceived Artaud's attempts to participate more closely in the making of the film as an intrusion, although she decided to accept some of his suggestions. The final rift followed the publication of two texts: a short note describing Artaud's scenario as 'a scenario made out of a single dream',²⁹ and a press release announcing the film as 'a dream on the screen'. The anonymous author of the latter, which came out in October 1927 in *Cinégraphie*, presented the new avant-garde production as an illustration of psychological research into the unconscious:

The most recent psychological research has established that the dream, far from being a formless and chaotic mass of images, always tends to organize itself according to precisely defined rules, and thus has its own – affective and symbolic – logic. . . . Such is the bold attempt of poet Antonin Artaud, who has proposed a scenario made of a dream. Mme Germaine Dulac has just finished making this film . . . and we can expect that [she] has surpassed herself in this effort of the avant-garde.³⁰

Despite Artaud's own occasional remarks on cinema as a medium for translating dreams (for example in 'Witchcraft and cinema'),³¹ this psychological interpretation seemed to betray his original preoccupation with the processes of thought and consciousness. As he wrote in 1928, the idea of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* was to uncover the distinctive, truly magical element of cinematic figuration, which nobody seemed to have found up to that date. Artaud believed that this unique element was, on the one hand, independent of any kind of *representation* attached to images,³² and on the other, involved in what he called the vibration and the birth of thought. This peculiar, close link between thinking and cinematic language bypassed the fallacious interposition of dreams as magical reflection or specular illusion of a deeper reality.

In contrast to the opinion held by critics of the 1920s like Goudal or Romain concerning the identical nature of dreams and cinema, Artaud described himself as 'a bad dreamer' (*le mauvais rêveur*), whose experience revealed a fundamental lack of consistency of dreams, both in the waking state and in sleep, and precluded any form of coherent visual representation.³³ The dissolution of the basic elements of dreams (images) and the lack of continuity comes from a more profound dissolution of the self. There is only what Artaud calls 'a musty collection of severed limbs', instead of an already existent, constituted self. Articulated verbal language displays the petrification or the paralysis of thought, caught in the grammatical and logical structures of a reasoning cut off from life, of a spirit cut off from the body. This is where cinematic expression comes in. According to Artaud, a vibration or a shock must occur between image and thought so that life can replace the stillness and discontinuity of that 'musty collection of severed limbs'. The cinematic image can breathe life into disparate

34 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L'Image-Temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 216.

fragments of thought precisely because it is not a static visual representation, it is not a representation at all: it asserts itself as 'image-movement', according to Gilles Deleuze. What cinema first exposes, claims Deleuze, is the powerlessness (*impuissance*) of thought, an impossibility of being, and this describes very accurately the original dimension of Artaud's experimentation with film.³⁴

The emphasis which Artaud placed on the relationship between film image and thought, between cinematic movement and the so-called 'birth of thought', which reconstructs the inner reality of the subject and makes the fragments of his body and soul coalesce, is perhaps what distinguishes his conception most clearly from the Dada-related, abstract productions of the 1920s. Like most Surrealists, Artaud is not concerned with breaking the illusion of the cinema, or with pointing at the camera as the apparatus which produces an illusion of movement, a mere simulacrum. For Artaud, reality, and especially the reality of the inner self, of the mind, is already fragmentary, incomplete, cut off from life. What Artaud is interested in is not the eye of the camera itself, the mechanical side of recording images, but the eye behind the camera, the living individual who sees the world through the camera, and, on the other hand, the viewing subject who reconstructs and recreates reality, with the help of her/his imagination, during the projection of the film. *The Seashell and the Clergyman* explores the inner world of the subject, the inner reality of the mind, rather than the structures of a static, inanimate reality, seen as mere appearance or simulacrum. The difference resides in Artaud's belief that the film image can directly present the movement and the interaction of certain states of mind, or certain emotions, rather than simply simulate and represent – indirectly suggest – this movement. In this sense, Artaud described his film by saying that:

The Seashell and the Clergyman does not tell a story but develops a series of states of mind which are derived from one another just as one thought is derived from another without this thought reproducing the reasonable sequence of events. . . . The characters are merely brains or hearts. The woman displays her animal desire, she has the shape of her desire, the spectral glitter of the instinct that drives her to be one and constantly different in her repeated metamorphoses.³⁵

35 Artaud, 'Le Cinéma et l'Abstraction', *Le Monde illustré*, no. 3645 (October 1927); reproduced in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III; trans. Helen Weaver, in Sontag (ed.), *Antonin Artaud*, p. 149.

Despite Artaud's frustration at not being involved in the actual making of the film, Dulac actually tried to provide an almost literal rendition of the scenario. She attempted to capture that spectral instinctual glitter of the female character, interpreted by Génica Athanasiou, by using a wide range of technical devices, which she thought would adequately translate Artaud's notion of a film made out of 'purely visual situations'. However, precisely because of her genuine preoccupation with giving a faithful rendition of Artaud's scenario, Dulac remains too close to the text itself, and at the same

36 Artaud, 'Cinéma et réalité', in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III; trans. Helen Weaver, in Sontag (ed.), *Antonin Artaud*, p. 151.

time too attached to a kind of nostalgic sentimentality, which prevents her from grasping the meaning of those 'purely visual situations'. As Artaud explained, they were meant to provoke 'a shock designed for the eyes, a shock drawn . . . from the very substance of our vision and not from psychological circumlocutions of a discursive nature which are merely the visual equivalent of a text'.³⁶ Dulac's Impressionist notion of 'inner life' disclosed through the closeup (or the 'psychological shot' as she called it), and her previous exploration of female fantasy in *The Smiling Mme Beudet* (1923), which, despite some technical audacities, is disappointingly conventional, led to a rather adulcorated portrayal of the woman in *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. The spectral, haunting apparition which was associated, throughout Artaud's scenario, with the clergyman's horrified expression becomes, in Dulac's vision, a passive object of desire: the shock designed for the eye is reduced to rapt contemplation of an elusive image.

Although the avant garde of the Impressionist school promoted the idea of a mainly visual cinema, related – in its intentions – to either French Impressionist painting or musical Impressionism, it was its inability to transgress psychological determinations which provoked Artaud's critical reaction to Dulac's interpretation of his scenario:

This screenplay is not the re-creation of a dream and should not be considered as such. I shall not attempt to excuse its apparent incoherence by the facile subterfuge of dreams . . . [and elsewhere] . . . We have yet to achieve a film with purely visual situations whose drama would come from a shock designed for the eyes, a shock drawn, so to speak, from the very substance of our vision and not from psychological circumlocutions of a discursive nature which are merely the visual equivalent of a text.³⁷

37 Artaud, 'Cinéma et réalité' in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 170 (1 November 1927); reproduced in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 23; trans. Helen Weaver, in Sontag (ed.), *Antonin Artaud*, p. 151.

Psychology, Artaud argued, had to be 'engulfed by actions' so that the film would achieve the quality of an entirely visual cinema. His aim was to 'shock' the eye through images that 'give psychology a form that is much more vital and active', without however using 'those connections that try to reveal the motives for our actions in an absolutely stupid light instead of spreading them before us in their original and profound barbarity'.³⁸ Artaud seems here to struggle to escape, on the one hand, the trappings of abstract cinema, with its obsession with geometrical patterns, rhythm and composition, and, on the other, the generalizations of the psychological treatment.

Surrealism, however, used the frame of a realist narrative and the conventions of Impressionist filmmaking as a support for a parodic, and antirational discourse. One example of this differentiation through parody is the use of the dissolve in *Un Chien andalou* as compared to its use in Dulac's work. In her article on the expressive techniques of the cinema, Dulac states that:

38 Ibid.

The dissolve is a means of moving from one image to the next in such a way that the end of the first is superimposed on the beginning of the next. It is also a technique with a psychological meaning.³⁹

The shots that are linked through dissolves in Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* implicitly undermine the psychological characterization of the realist film, and the related literary conventions of the psychological novel. One such example is the 'inexplicable', illogical transformation of an underarm hair into a sea urchin, or the 'unsolved mystery' of the box with diagonal stripes containing an envelope and a tie with the same pattern. Dissolves here play on the viewer's frustrated expectation, on the absence of any elucidation or psychological reference to the previous and/or the following shots.

The Surrealist interpretation of film as 'conscious hallucination' that bridges reality and imagination, and explores the absurd and the irrational of everyday existence, effectively challenged both the formalist approach of pure or abstract cinema (as represented by Léger, Richter, Eggeling) and the aesthetics of Impressionist cinema. The major objections made to these trends by Surrealist commentators were, first, that they paid excessive attention to formal aspects at the expense of content; and, secondly, that their 'modernist' technique remained attached to conservative moral and political tenets. By criticizing literary and theatrical adaptations for the screen, Surrealism promoted the idea of a cinema inspired by daily life situations, which would radically contradict common perceptions, moral and social conventions, religious beliefs. The new language of film had to illuminate equally disquieting, unfamiliar topics in order to achieve a truly 'revolutionary' impact, thus heightening the impression of 'reality' and, at the same time, disclosing images that the eye has not yet seen. If this aspiration towards a 'revolutionary' cinematographic image that would directly influence social and political reality, identifying imagination and action, remained an unfulfilled hope of the movement, the nonconformist approach to film narrative, to continuity rules, stimulated production on the boundaries of commercial cinema, and created a fertile ground for future exploration of the visual language of film.

The very notion of the avant garde became controversial in the context of the debates between the Impressionist school and the Surrealist film critics and directors of the first decades. Surrealism deliberately undermined the technical processes and narrative techniques used by both alternative avant-garde trends, and this constitutes the area where Surrealism had the most notable impact: that is, in its controversy with the French Impressionist cinema, in its two-fold relationship with the early Dada experiments, and in its confrontation with modern, and late modern film practice – mainly through Buñuel's work during the 1950s and 1960s. The recent,

occasional resurfacing of Surrealist themes and motifs, as well as the interest of contemporary film critics and historians in the theory associated with the movement, indicates that the spirit and anti-aesthetic stance, rather than the formal innovations, survived throughout the last decades and constituted the provocative legacy of an age when cinema and dream were the epitome of modernity, the ultimately distinctive 'figure of desire'.

reports and debates

report: The last/vision machine

ALISON BUTLER

¹ Hollis Frampton, 'For a metahistory of film', quoted in Ian Christie, *The Last Machine* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), p. 7.

² William Dickson, quoted in Christie, *The Last Machine*, p. 10.

'Cinema is the Last Machine. It is probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses',¹ wrote Hollis Frampton in 1971, whence the elegant and evocative title of the recent BBC/British Film Institute television series commissioned to celebrate the centenary of cinema. The series explores the early years of the century of cinema in both possible senses of the term, interweaving early film history with a broader cultural-historical approach to the early years of the twentieth century and the question of modernity. Although it is principally a work of synthesis and simplification, aimed at the popularization of the insights and discoveries of early cinema studies, the series and accompanying book provide more than a snapshot of the academic field: the project of an integrated cultural history of early cinema as opposed to the much more hermetic study of its formal codes is still so new that any engagement with it contributes a new interpretation. *The Last Machine's* originality is found in its exploration of early cinema's historical moment, on the cusp of the modern but still marked by its late-Victorian origins, as William Dickson claimed, 'the crown and flower of nineteenth century magic'.²

Like the title, the historical framework of the series/book is taken from Frampton, who argued that what is invented to meet the physical needs of one age survives to meet the psychic needs of another. The obsolescence of the machine was thus, he claimed, a precondition for cinema to become an art:

The cinema was the typical survival from the Age of Machines.

Together with still photographs, it performed prizeworthy functions:

3 Hollis Frampton, quoted in Christie, *The Last Machine*, p. 7.

it taught and reminded us (after what then seemed a bearable delay) how things looked, how things worked, how we do things . . . and of course (by example) how to feel and think.³

4 Ibid., p. 9.

In the Introduction to the book, Ian Christie suggests that Frampton's ideas offer a useful guide 'to understanding the late-Victorian world which stumbled upon cinema', and contrasts this favourably with approaches that locate early cinema more firmly in twentieth-century modernity *or* in an archaic past accessible only to cultural archaeology. In adopting this framework, Christie is amplifying a concept which seems characteristic of the most recent theoretical and historical work on early cinema: the period of transition. The question 'Was (cinema) a new way of doing familiar things, or something new for which no clear purpose yet existed?'⁴ is clearly rhetorical.

5 Ibid., p. 28.

The themes of the programmes – travel in space and time, the city, the body, reality and fantasy – are derived not from the forms and genres of early film or from histories of the institution, but from social and cultural histories of the period. Each programme grounds the uses and preoccupations of early cinema firmly in nineteenth-century practices of entertainment, technology, development and conquest, underscoring the point with a rather airless aesthetic of theme-park Victoriana. At the same time, the fantasies articulated in early films are often described as adumbrating future technological achievements and historical events yet to come—such as space flight and World War I—and writers and artists rather than inventors are identified as the real 'pioneers of cinema as a new kind of experience'.⁵ Early cinema is described as a form in which the effects of established technologies and the anticipation of new ones could be given collective, imaginary shape. New experiences of time and space brought about by the railway and the motor car were represented in films such as Hepworth's *How it Feels to be Run Over* (1900) and Paul's *The ? Motorist* (1906), while cinema was also taken up as a metaphor for the new experience of speed, as when Octave Mirbeau wrote:

6 Octave Mirbeau, 'La 628-E8', quoted in Christie, *The Last Machine*, p. 22.

'Everywhere life is rushing insanely like a cavalry charge, and it vanishes cinematographically, like trees and silhouettes along a road'.⁶ Christie even suggests that a 'vernacular relativity' in early cinema emerged contemporaneously with Eisenstein's theory. The precise relationships between technology, experience and representation are the subject of questions rather than hypotheses here, but the trope of 'culture shock' implies a mainly therapeutic, compensatory function for cinema, even where Christie finds a sort of shadow-modernism in the oneiric and violent imagery of many early films. The development of early cinema, in this account, is not technologically driven but responds to the needs and impulses of the existing social formation and its imaginary.

In formulating the relationship between culture and technology in

this way, Christie is reversing the best-known hypothesis of Walter Benjamin's essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'.⁷ Benjamin's notion of a popular modernism inscribed in the medium by its technological base had a profound influence on early cinema studies in the 1970s, grounding arguments for the formal and political radicalism of the primitive mode and justifying parallels between early cinema and the contemporary avant garde. In the 1980s, a broader reading of the essay gave rise to an agenda for research in media history succinctly summed up by Rod Stoneman:

The contradictory factors at play in the dynamic context of the early years of cinema make it a central site for the project, mapped out by Walter Benjamin in his essay on the industrialisation of the image, of specifying the circumstances which determine the 'manner in which human sense perception is organised and the medium in which it is accomplished'.⁸

Despite the shift in emphasis from questions of modernism to questions of modernity, the essay's influence on early cinema studies has continued to come from its advocacy of cinema's potential for technologically modern *and therefore* politically progressive modes of perception and representation.

However, even as it advances this argument, the essay is pocketed with elements of an underdeveloped counter-argument which is far more pessimistic about technology, and which, even viewed as part of a dialectic, undermines the essay's stated intent to assist with 'the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art'.⁹ The Epilogue's famous statement, that 'Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves', describes a use of the media which outlived fascism and served also to contribute to the preservation of existing property relations in the bourgeois democracies. Miriam Hansen's study of the several versions of the essay has disclosed its profound ambiguity, particularly in relation to the question of 'aura'¹⁰ (an ambiguity which bears significantly on her own work on early cinema and the public sphere).¹¹ In the first version of the essay, according to Hansen, 'Benjamin elaborates in greater detail on the relationship of human beings and technology which, instead of liberating them from myth, confronts them as a force of second nature just as overwhelming as the forces of a more elementary nature in archaic times'.¹² Some of the footnotes (which, according to Hansen, contain chunks of the first version) point to film's involvement in this oppressive second nature. Note nineteen states that:

The film is the art form that is most in keeping with the increased threat to life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive

7 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

8 Rod Stoneman, 'Early cinema: an introduction', *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1982), p. 3.

9 Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 220.

10 Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience: "The blue flower in the land of technology"', *New German Critique*, vol. 40 (Winter 1987), pp. 179–224.

11 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

12 Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience', p. 205.

¹³ Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 252.

apparatus – changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen.¹³

Without going so far as to acknowledge that film may actually have promoted the transformation of spatio-temporal perception or admitting that this is a form of experiential impoverishment, Benjamin here accepts that film may be doing no more than assisting in the process of adaptation to new aspects of urban life. Note twenty-one, a note on the Epilogue rather than the bulk of the essay, displays great prescience about the role that the mass media were to take in World War II:

Mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of the masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events and in war, all of which are nowadays captured by the camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves. This process, whose significance need not be stressed, is intimately connected with the development of the techniques of reproduction and photography. Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye. And even though such a view may be as accessible to the human eye as it is to the camera, the image received by the eye cannot be enlarged the way a negative is enlarged. This means that mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behaviour which particularly favours mechanical equipment.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 253.

Here we find 'unconscious optics' pressed into the service of the most sinister mode of capitalist organization, and in place of 'shock', its opposite number, spectacle. Even as he imagines the transformative potential of film, the 'dynamite of a tenth of a second', Benjamin also has intimations of much grimmer possibilities.

Ironically, as the Artwork essay ages, its underlying unease about technology is becoming its most influential aspect. In the recent work of Paul Virilio, we find the dystopian traces of Benjamin's pessimistic counter-argument worked up into a full-scale theory which departs from the earlier writer's notion of war as an 'unnatural utilization' of technology, to discover in it technology's very telos. Virilio's latest book to be translated into English, *The Vision Machine*¹⁵ is a polemical history of technologies of sight which ranges from classical antiquity to today, from military technoscience to nineteenth-century city planning. An engagement with Benjamin is ever-present in the substance of the argument and occasionally surfaces explicitly, for example:

Benjamin was later to rejoice that 'cinemagoers have become examiners, but examiners having fun'. If we turn the phrase around, things look a bit less promising: what we are now dealing with is an audience for whom the investigation, the test, has become fun.

¹⁵ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

Actions spring from terror, events that embody the new passion, like stringing people up from lampposts, brandishing freshly lopped heads on spikes, storming palaces and hotels, seeing that residents' names are posted on the doors of apartment blocks, reducing the Bastille to rubble, desecrating convents and places of worship, digging up the dead . . . Nothing is sacred any more because nothing is now meant to be inviolable. This is the tracking down of darkness, the tragedy brought about by an exaggerated love of light.¹⁶

16 Ibid., pp. 34–5.

Virilio's argument develops as an ideological mirror image reversal of Benjamin's, equating the loss of 'aura' with the disappearance of a necessary symbolic order, and the development of 'unconscious optics' with surveillance, investigation and terror. The chronological scope of the book is noteworthy:

The moment they appeared on the scene, the first optical devices (Al-Hasan ibn al-Haitam aka Alhazen's camera obscura in the tenth century, Roger Bacon's instruments in the thirteenth, the increasing number of visual prostheses, lenses, astronomic telescopes and so on from the Renaissance on) profoundly altered the contexts in which mental images were topographically stored and retrieved.¹⁷

17 Ibid., p. 4.

The history of the industrialization of vision, from the Renaissance to the age of mechanical reproduction to the information age, is represented here simply as the unfolding of 'the inexorable march of progress of representational technologies, of their military, scientific and investigative instrumentalization over the centuries'.¹⁸

18 Ibid., p. 47.

At its simplest, Virilio's thesis is that as representation advances, reality retreats. In the opening chapter, 'A topographical amnesia', he traces the 'rapid collapse of mnemonic consolidation',¹⁹ the supplanting of human memory by the artificial memory of photography and film, and the erosion of faith in human perception as it has been replaced by optical instruments. Subsequent chapters, 'Less than an image', 'Public image' and 'Candid camera', trace the effects of photography, film, streetlighting, police investigation, the public sphere brought into existence by the French Revolution, video surveillance, and a host of ideologies and practices around vision and light in bringing about the repression of the invisible and the waning of reality.

19 Ibid., p. 7.

Technology, in this model, develops under the impetus of a compelling internal logic which exceeds the perceived needs of the social formation. For example, cinema's capacity to transform memory and perception is implied in the first principle of film technique. Without engaging memory, the phi-phenomenon on which the illusion of movement in the cinema depends would be impossible:

How can we have failed to grasp that the discovery of retinal retention that made the development of Marey's chronophotography

and the cinematography of the Lumiere brothers possible, also propelled us into the totally different province of the mental retention of images? . . . [H]ow can we accept the principle of retinal retention without also having to accept the role of memorisation in immediate perception? . . . The moment high-speed photography was invented, making cinema a concrete possibility, the problem of the paradoxically real nature of 'virtual' imagery was in fact posed.²⁰

²⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

Thus pre-cinema and early cinema enacted a historical process which would only be fully understood a century later.

Virilio turns his attention to current technology in development in his closing chapter, 'The vision machine'. As the ultimate horizon of a historical process that has been unfolding since the Renaissance or earlier, Virilio proposes closed-circuit optics, the automated perception and interpretation of synthetic images at the speed of light, 'the industrialization of the non-gaze'.²¹ Now that the world has been rendered so completely visible, the cutting edge of technological development, particularly for the military, is in the exclusion of human perception, either by defence strategies based in deception or the automation of perception, that is to say, artificial vision. The vision machine or 'Perceptron' doesn't make an image – it makes sight: 'Having no graphic or videographic outputs, the automatic-perception prosthesis will function like a kind of mechanized imaginary from which, this time, we would be totally excluded'.²²

²¹ Ibid., p. 73.

²² Ibid., p. 60.

Cinema, in this historical order where humanity is increasingly obsolete, is not the last machine but the place of the last spectator. *The Vision Machine* elaborates and extends one line of argument from the Artwork essay, taking it outside Benjamin's Marxist frame of reference and abandoning the concept of a separate sphere of 'social transformations expressed by these changes of perception'.²³ With the disappearance of social causes, technological progress becomes the animus of history rather than its instrumentation. Virilio's book functions almost as a classical *reductio ad absurdum* or a Swiftian satire, disproving the Artwork essay's equation of technological progress with social progress with its extravagant demonstration of the dehumanizing power of the 'logistics of the image'.

²³ Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 224.

Early cinema studies, meanwhile, has followed the other branch of the Artwork essay's technology/progress dilemma. With the decline of belief in both modernism and Marxism, early film scholars have abandoned the notion of a latent radicalism inscribed in the technology itself in favour of research which seeks out the contradictions and marginal elements in the capitalist version of the popular which actually existed in the early years of cinema. They tend to pose the moment of transition *between* modes of production and distribution rather than the new modes in themselves as the site of radical possibility. Hence Peter Wollen in the Introduction to a book on the

Mexican printmaker J. G. Posada:

Posada and Méliès occupy a peculiar niche in art history, in a particular period of transition. They came after the woodcut and the stage illusion, but before the mass circulation press and cinema. They were small-scale urban professionals, whose work went to entertain, not so much the masses as the crowd. They come right at the beginning of the age of mechanical reproduction, but still tied to old systems of distribution and exhibition, which were swept away in their lifetime or soon after their heyday.²⁴

Drawing on E. J. Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*, Wollen locates Méliès and Posada in urban settings which had not yet been thoroughly transformed by Taylorism and Fordism, in an 'interzone' between the popular mass media and personal forms of art and craft,²⁵ an art of excess that was pre- or protorevolutionary. It was also premodernist, although a later generation of Mexican modernists would look to Posada's work – as the Surrealists did to that of Méliès – as a missing link between modernism and popular tradition.

Writing on early cinema, Miriam Hansen applies the notion of a period of transition to consumption rather than production. In Hansen's account there is also a period of transition, specifically associated with the nickelodeon:

The formation of a mass audience for the movies involved a process of multiple and uneven transitions, drawing on and combining different types of public sphere. In its emancipation from existing live entertainment outlets the cinema grafted itself onto surviving structures of working-class culture for some time. These in turn were transformed rather than merely rejected, by the industry's efforts to match the mass formula with the better-paying clientele of mainstream entertainments. The conflict between immediate market interests (catering to the traditional nickelodeon clientele) and long-term institutional goals (wooing the middle class and upwardly mobile) was eventually negotiated through classical codification and the creation of a spectator. During the transitional period, however, it may well have been a source of textual ambiguity and overdetermination.²⁶

On the basis of this moment of transition Hansen proposes early cinema as a possible alternative public sphere for women, immigrants and the working class, locating political and cultural possibilities in the 'nonsynchronous layers and accidental effects' of a time of transformation. Although her dates and rationale differ significantly from Wollen's, they share an underlying conception of the progressive potential of popular culture, particularly at points of transition, in the interval between the invention of a technology and its full social implementation.

Most cinema historians have located this progressive potential in

²⁴ Peter Wollen, 'Introduction', in Julian Rothenstein (ed.), *J. G. Posada, Messenger of Mortality* (London: Redstone Press, 1989), p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 88.

27 Noël Burch, *Life to those Shadows* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

28 Christie, *The Last Machine*, p. 71.

29 Narration, 'Tales from the City', *The Last Machine* (BBC, 1995).

fantasy forms (or in fantasizing as a mode of spectatorship) rather than in those of an objective optics of discovery, that is in imagination rather than vision. Fantasy has recently become a privileged figure in early cinema studies: Noël Burch concludes *Life to those Shadows* by remarking that the similarity between film narrative and the mechanisms of dream and fantasy leads him 'to think even that this research programme is the least futile of all today';²⁷ Hansen's work on early and silent cinema is concerned with memory and fantasy as modes of spectatorial appropriation; and references to the train's arrival at La Ciotat are generally made these days only to point out that if the audience had wanted to see real trains they would have gone to the station. *The Last Machine*'s contribution to the study of early cinema is in this area. By focusing on high and popular culture in the years immediately preceding the invention of cinema and the first two decades of its existence, the series and book explore early cinema as a form of public fantasy. Christie shows that even in documentary and scientific applications of film, unconscious preoccupations, narrative traditions, artistic pride and showmanship infiltrated and often overwhelmed the scientific impulse. In 'The Body Electric', the programme on images of the body, Christie cites Hollis Frampton's interpretation of Muybridge's zoetrope sequence studies of bodies in motion as compulsive restagings of the events surrounding his shooting of his wife's lover.²⁸ 'Real Lives' shows how early scientific and actuality film operated with the legacy of public display represented not only by Prince Albert and the Great Exhibition, but also by Barnum's Incredible Feejee Mermaid. Medical films such as the 1902 film of the operation to separate Siamese twins Radica and Doodica, banned from use in its professional context, resurfaced in fairground freak-shows. Entomological films were parodied as early as 1903 by Hepworth's *The Unclean World*, in which two insects under a microscope are revealed as large clockwork toys when hands appear to rewind them. In the extraordinary, weird work of Wladislaw Starewicz, animated insects strut round in hats and coats and check into hotels. *The Cameraman's Revenge* (1911) is a hilarious paradoxical play on the notion of film as evidence: one bug films another in the course of an illicit assignation, in order to prove that the delinquent bug has broken the terms of a legacy. Alongside the sober, educational uses of film which developed in the early years, carnivalesque modes sprang up like garden weeds, questioning and corrupting the new medium.

Going beyond Benjamin's idea of film as a means of acclimatizing to the speed and shocks of modern city life, *The Last Machine* touches on less behaviourist explanations of the uses of film fantasy: 'Movies started with everyday city life as their first subject, but their makers soon discovered that what the audiences wanted was a fantasy of city life . . .'; what early audiences got from films was not an extension of reality but 'a revenge on reality'.²⁹ This revenge on reality is figured

30 Virginia Woolf, quoted in Christie, *The Last Machine*, p. 132.

as a haunting in the survey of the cine-fantastic and religious cinema which closes *The Last Machine*. In 'The Waking Dream', the most theoretical programme/chapter of the series/book, Christie explores the possibility that film's aesthetic vocation is not the reproduction of the real, but Virginia Woolf's 'secret language which we feel and see, but never speak',³⁰ precipitated into filmic form in movies such as *The Student of Prague* (1913). Wegener's film drew heavily on traditions of the supernatural in various forms, including the Phantasmagoria, which Christie sees as the forerunner of all horror and fantasy films. Although mentioned in passing rather than offered as a theoretical model, the Phantasmagoria strikes me as a rich metaphor for cinematic fantasy. The term was coined by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, a Belgian inventor, for the ghostly magic-lantern illusions he created in public performances in France in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Amongst his subject matter, violent scenes from the Revolution were interspersed with gothic imagery. When Thomas Carlyle wrote his *French Revolution*, 'phantasmagory' and phantasmatic imagery featured so largely in his hallucinatory rhetoric that the term has come to stand for the nightmare of history itself. Late romanticism added a further meaning, given in the third entry under the term in the OED: 'a shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures, as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created by literary description'. Terry Castle interprets this last shift in meaning as a symptom of the 'spectralization' of mental space:

Even as we have come to discount the spirit-world of our ancestors and to equate seeing ghosts and apparitions with having 'too much' imagination, we have also come to believe, as if through a kind of epistemological recoil, in the spectral nature of our own thoughts.³¹

31 Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: spectral technology and the metaphors of modern reverie', *Critical Inquiry*, no. 15 (Autumn 1988), pp. 26–61.

As a vivid image of the externalization of mental images and the internalization of historical processes accomplished by cinema, the etymologically-shifting term 'phantasmagoria' could scarcely be bettered. This metaphor for cinematic reverie takes us back to Benjamin's optical unconscious with a new perspective: perhaps the optical unconscious is not the deep penetration of the psyche by the logistics of the image, as Virilio suggests, but the 'epistemological recoil' of consciousness against technology's rigours, the release of something severed from its unconscious moorings by the alienations of modernity: in the cinema there is darkness as well as light. *The Last Machine* uses the unfashionable term 'collective unconscious' to describe the workings of public fantasy in early film; a notion which was also explored by Benjamin in one of the most interesting passages excised from the final version of the Artwork essay. In Benjamin's first version, the section on the optical unconscious is entitled 'Mickey Mouse', and includes a consideration of film's ability to envisage extreme mental states including dreams and displacements,

³² Quoted in Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience', p. 221.

³³ Ibid., p. 222.

hallucinations and nightmares in 'the creation of figures of the collective dream such as the earth-encircling Mickey Mouse'.³² These figures may articulate utopian wishes or atavistic impulses, may function therapeutically or may even induce mass psychosis; the laughter they provoke, Benjamin writes, 'hovers over an abyss of horror'.³³ In the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin used phantasmagoria as a metaphor for this hallucinatory imaginary which he understood by then as the most contradictory, over-determined and contested site in capitalist culture. The notion of cinema as phantasmagoria, like Frampton's concept of the 'Last Machine' usefully reminds us that the history of early film is really two histories: the history of a technology and the history of dreams.

Console-ing Passions: 4th Annual Conference of Television, Video and Feminism, Seattle, 6–9 April 1995

Console-ing Passions, possibly the only gathering dedicated to feminist television and video, now has the air of a well-established conference: friendly, familiar faces to greet you; groups locked into lively conversation over coffee and pastries from day one; workshops, panels and screenings drawing on recognizable themes. The main business of the conference was held in the waterside South Campus Centre of Seattle's University of Washington – a pleasant building with functional seminar rooms and a terrace overlooking Portage Bay, location for *Sleepless in Seattle*. Seattle in spring is beautiful, despite frequent but gentle rain, and does seem to be a more likely setting for a Tom Hanks romance than for Grunge.

The conference ran smoothly thanks to the coordinator Susan Jeffords of the University of Washington, ably assisted by a strong team of women, and the seemingly indefatigable organizing committee of Lauren Rabinovitz, Julie D'Acci, Jane Feuer, Mary Beth Haralovich, Susan Jeffords, Marsha Kinder and Lynn Spigel. Staging a conference of this size with a different venue each year is an enormous task, and these women, plus members of the Advisory Board (Dianne L. Brooks, Phebe Chao, DeeDee Halleck, Ellen Seiter and Mimi White), invest a great deal of time and effort in making the event happen. Feminists working in areas of television and video owe a debt of gratitude to them for facilitating what has become an important forum for discussion and debate which quite rightly attracts a large and enthusiastic group of contributors, discussants and participants. Whilst these are predominantly North American, there are also representatives from Britain and Australia but in relatively small

numbers. This may be due to a lack of information circulating outside the USA, and this despite the emphasis in this year's call for papers on examples from other national contexts. I know, for instance, that a number of the British delegates had to provide each other with information about the conference, despite having attended in previous years. Thus, overseas visitors are drawn largely from the academic community, whereas producers, artists and students from the USA are brought together variously under its key concerns, thereby challenging some of the boundaries around particular practices and disciplinary areas. However, perhaps it is in the nature of such conferences that this remains implicit, and that some of the intriguing questions which present themselves are not explored in formal debate. What does it mean, for example, to mount such a conference? Is there an assumed field out there? Are the papers firstly feminist, or drawn generally from television, video production and film studies? What is the nature of the intellectual debate around feminist work in the area, for example the challenges to gender categorization from postmodern and queer theories? Similarly, what are the politics of feminist academic practice in the changing media and academic landscapes of the 1990s? And lastly, and perhaps most pressingly for this conference, there is the need to investigate the production and reproduction of a predominantly white agenda. Whilst the conference did include panels dealing with, for example, Asian–American Identities and Black Womanhood, this had unfortunate and ironic resonances with the marginalization of feminism and separatist tendencies.

These questions are, of course, those with which the Programme Committee and the Advisory Board will presumably have grappled. However, the absence of programmed opening and closing plenary sessions meant that there was little clue to the shape or identity of the conference, nor any statement of rationale from the organizers.

Opening plenaries are important in setting the tone of conferences, and keynote papers can provide shared reference points for the more disparate panels. Closing plenaries are often fairly explosive events, but do afford important opportunities for participants to raise more general issues relating to the conference, thus providing important feedback for the organizers. Thus, the structure of the conference in blocks of four or five simultaneous panels had the feel of 'pick and mix', and there could have been as many routes through it as there were delegates attending. Whilst this could be viewed as reflecting the eclectic mix of the field(s) of feminist film and television studies and practice, it also begs the question of what the role and function of such a conference is, or might be, and the need, perhaps, for a firmer strategy on the part of the organizers.

Whilst there were panels dedicated to video production and 'alternative' broadcast television practices, with lively screenings throughout the conference, popular television formed the focus of many of the papers, in particular, genres relating to girl culture, the 1950s, daytime programming, and a whole session devoted to *The X Files*, the 'way cool' US television series which seems to have replaced *Star Trek* as offering the potential for transgressive readings and, no doubt, in the fullness of time, the study of its fans. Some sessions were organized around genres themselves, whilst others were themed conceptually on, for example, sexuality, the body, queer readings and pornography. Nevertheless, the majority of the contributing papers tended to focus on a 'hermetically sealed' textual analysis. The usual model for this approach is the employment of a particular theoretical framework in the exploration of the text, with little or no acknowledgement of the provenance of theory or of other aspects of popular television, such as production and consumption. This model never needs to justify its choice of either theory or text, but simply claims this to be

feminist television studies. It can also result, as in a session called 'Domestic Bliss', in a rather uncomfortable ridiculing of the 'feminine worlds' of much daytime output which, as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis pointed out, is reminiscent of early approaches to the analysis of the soap opera. If this work is indeed feminist television studies, then it is deeply disappointing in its lack of scope and imagination, but also in its lack of (ironically) passion and a sense of feminist politics. This could well be a reflection of the institutionalization of feminist media studies and the pressure we are all placed under to publish 'at all costs' for disciplinary and personal survival. Sadly, this imperative seems to be placing its cold hand on the shoulder of feminist intellectual production. However, some of the liveliest and most thought-provoking papers drew on popular television to discuss much broader issues. Beverly Skeggs chose to raise questions about methodology and the importance of the notion of 'situated knowledges' drawn from experience and (socially) located knowledge to feminist research strategies and to her own in particular. She used *Absolutely Fabulous* – much to the delight of her mainly North American audience who had just sampled the first series of this situation comedy – to raise questions of class codes, in positioning and interpretation. She drew on conversations with young working-class women in order to explore the confused reception of this programme, especially in relation to femininity and class. Amy Villarejo, in a wonderfully entertaining presentation, used Michael Moore's *TV Nation* to investigate the marketing of femininity to Amazonian Indians, and Marla Shelton looked at Whitney Houston as a case study in the cultural politics of blackness and black womanhood. Other papers addressed the intensifying phenomenon of 'sensational' new television genres, tabloid television, infomercials and live courtroom television, and one session was devoted to depictions of sexual assault and rape.

Audiences were addressed, although I did not detect what Jane Feuer identified as a move towards audience in the papers at the conference. Her paper took issue with 'ethnographic' audience studies for its tendency to produce the obvious and banal. She demonstrated this by revealing some 'results' of audience research carried out by ABC which confirmed many of the 'findings' of academic research. In so doing, she raised important questions on the institutional shaping of research and the resultant knowledge produced about the audience. Her critique of qualitative audience research is not new, and closer reading of such studies reveals that the most interesting studies subject their data to analysis and that many are concerned with understanding the social and cultural construction of identities through and within popular forms. In parentheses, I would observe the apparent need for empirical work on audiences to constantly justify itself, unlike the theory/textual paradigm referred to above, and would note how often the 'sociological' is dismissed as 'stating the obvious'.

A very interesting session looked at the shift of television and video away from the domestic, and called for a similar shift of attention in audience work. Ellen Seiter outlined her current research on the use of television and video by pre-school teachers and day-carers – the largely 'pink collar' occupational sector – exploring questions of class difference, especially in relation to control and regulation of viewing. Video installation in public places, and in particular the shopping mall, was the focus of Anna McCarthy's paper, in which she made some suggestive points about the suturing of subjects in 'placeless' or liminal sites by the use of electronic media. This certainly requires us to address television and video in its public modes of consumption. Similarly, Virginia Nightingale looked at the role of new communication and information technologies in the transformation of everyday life, especially the potential of new information

technologies for spatial relocation, the breaking of boundaries between home and work, and the reconfiguring of national and global time schemes. This theme was also taken up by Mackenzie Wark, specifically by reference to 'global media events' and the instant dialogue created in the virtual geography of the networks, or, to use his term following Virilio, 'vectors' of media circulation. Questions he posed challenged the certainty of origins of the media discourse as well as those of 'interpretive communities'. A question from the floor asked how his observations could be related specifically to a feminist research agenda, and here we have a core problem for (postmodern) feminist television studies to address. Also, and more contentiously, should papers presented at a feminist conference address themselves primarily to issues of gender? Time was too short for these points to be taken up at the conference, which leads me to a further, more general observation on the organization and timetabling of sessions. Panels consisted of three, or sometimes four, papers to be covered in ninety minutes. This is hardly time enough to address the issues raised and to allow some discussion from the floor to develop. In addition, many of the papers in the sessions I attended were presented incredibly badly. By this I mean a lack of acknowledgement of the audience, either in terms of its knowledge or attention span. Written papers read at speed do not communicate information or ideas effectively. And many, unforgivably, did not keep to the allotted time, creating problems for other panel members and effectively closing down discussion from delegates. Sadly, only occasionally had speakers really thought about structuring a presentation which recognized that the *written* register is vastly different from the *spoken* register. If this conference, and others like it, are to make a difference to the development of our fields of study, then we need to learn to speak and listen to each other! Of course, much of the 'real' dialogue takes place in the margins of conferences such as

these and the 'buzz' at the delightful reception held for delegates was the need to address questions of methodology, as these seemed to be arising in a number of contexts. Perhaps this would provide some way of exploring the range of different approaches apparent in work on feminist television and video as it was represented at Console-ing Passions.

Reflecting on time spent at a feminist conference outside my own national context, I might have expected to discover something of feminism within the North American Academy or in the general culture. With the notable exception of one 'workshop' which addressed issues of pedagogy, this broader context was strangely absent from the papers or discussions. Rather, they tended to be closed off from the political questions of feminist intellectual work, its location within the academy, its methodologies, and the general climate within the USA. Next year's conference is to be themed around the 'backlash'. I feel that a good place to begin examining the state of feminism and its intellectual trajectories in relation to television and video is to start not with those who are critical of it, but with the conference itself – its delegates.

Ann Gray

16th International Celtic Film and Television Festival, Fort William, 3–6 April 1995

Journeying north to the sixteenth Celtic Film and Television Festival, the train passes through scenery familiar from countless representations. From the romantic sensibilities of *Landseer* and *Rob Roy* to the ironic quotations of the BBC's latest policeman *Hamish Macbeth*, these misty mountains and lochs are the images of Scotland that we are used to. Fort William itself, however, is part of the Scotland which we seldom see on our television and cinema screens, a defiantly unpicturesque cluster of housing schemes and

industrial remains, a part of the Highlands where people still live and work.

The festival aims to show and reward the best of indigenous work from Celtic producers. While Ireland and, increasingly, Scotland are being colonized as locations for big-budget Hollywood productions, this festival celebrates work with a lower profile, minority language and often community-based. Much of the innovative and challenging work it has showcased over the years has contained implicit or explicit challenges both to the dominant images of the Celtic countries and to the dominant practices of film and television production.

From its humble beginnings in Benbecula's village hall in 1980, the festival now consists of four days of screenings, discussions and lavishly sponsored entertainment. This move is a tribute to the growth of the Celtic Film and Television Association and of production activity (this year's festival had 228 entries across six categories), but it is a shift which brings tensions in its wake, raising new questions about the role and identity of the festival. Bringing together filmmakers, broadcasters, administrators, actors and activists from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, its diversity has traditionally been the festival's source of strength. It also raises important questions of identity, of Celtic identity, but also of the location of its participants – geographical, institutional and professional. These questions seemed to underlie the key issue of this festival – that of the changing nature of Celtic film and television production.

The question of Celtic identity is a problematic one, and one that the organizers sensibly do not attempt to solve. The work selected for competition and exhibition at the festival came from a range of sources, and the presence and success of a number of productions in English, as well as Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Breton testified to its breadth. The festival has established itself as a place for producers to meet, exchange ideas

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and, crucially, to watch productions which are seldom widely or well distributed. These problems of access, distribution and funding seem to me to be the essential shared culture of the Celtic Film Festival. Whilst there are other related debates about linguistic and political autonomies, the central experience in terms of an audiovisual Celtic culture would appear to be one of marginality. This marginality is expressed not so much through a geographical peripherality to a dominant central culture, but rather through relationships with the institutions of broadcasting and filmmaking. One example of this was the case of *Just Another Sinner*, a BBC Scotland production on the life and work of R. D. Laing, which won the festival's award for Documentary Features against a strong field. May Miller and Eleanor Yule, its producer and director, used their acceptance speech to highlight the problems they experienced in securing network funding or access for a powerful and hardly parochial work.

One of the underlying, but sadly underexplored, issues of the festival was the question of how to negotiate this relationship between small producers and dominant centres. That each of the Celtic countries and regions represented at the festival has a different form of television provision can be seen as one indicator of the complexity of this area and of the difficulties inherent in formulating a coherent policy or campaigning position in relation to minority broadcasting.

The Welsh experience is often held as a model, owing to the existence of Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), the dedicated Welsh channel which was established after concerted lobbying in 1982. Yet as John Geraint of BBC Wales pointed out during one session, envy of this provision is not confined to producers outwith Wales. Those within Wales making Welsh programmes for the English-speaking majority feel marginalized and under-funded.

Irish Gaelic broadcasters are following this pattern with the establishment of a separate Irish language channel Teilifis na Gaeilge,

which is to begin broadcasting two hours daily in 1996, an initiative which elicited much interest and enthusiasm at the festival.

However, its director Cathal Goan warned of the potential problems posed by the high expectations generated amongst audience and independent producers, and also drew attention to the difficulties arising from lack of funding and trained personnel.

Gaelic production in Scotland has of course received an enormous boost from the £9.5 million support which the government granted after successful lobbying. Administered by the Comataidh Telebhisein Gaidhlig, it currently produces some 165 hours of programming a year in collaboration with the BBC, Scottish Television and Grampian. There are tensions in this relationship as the committee is seen to favour a single, unified notion of Gaelic identity. Already there have been questions asked about the experience of the committee and its direction. Many of these were raised by Alastair Moffat, of Scottish Television Enterprises, in a lecture held outwith the festival itself, which became one of its main talking points. In his radical attempt to claim a shared Gaelic heritage for all Scots, regardless of where they live or what language they speak, the more cynical detected an all too familiar narrative – the economic desire of a powerful lowland broadcaster to colonize the funding made available for Gaelic production.

In Brittany and Cornwall, linguistic and regional identities seem less clearly defined against a powerful national culture; certainly there is less production activity in these areas. Powerful tensions in the Breton group erupted when a speaker from the floor accused the official representative of limiting the development of the language by treating it as a dead language, enshrined in its purity rather than open to change. Unfortunately this intervention and the issues it raised were quashed by the chair on this occasion, showing a fear of controversy that seemed to run throughout proceedings. I say unfortunately, because the conflict is one that

has faced most of the other language groups at the festival, and their different means of responding to it could have made for useful consultation.

As it was, the possibilities for sharing tactics and experiences seemed to operate more effectively at an informal level rather than in the official organization of discussion sessions. Most of these discussions were focused on industrial questions of finance and funding. (In fact one contributor tellingly labelled the Culture and Commerce session Culture versus Commerce.) Yet, despite the hard-headedness this suggested, there seemed a high level of wishful thinking evident in what was said. For example, delegates repeatedly held up coproduction as a kind of grail of Celtic promise. This is understandable, as it appears to offer a means of maximizing funding through cooperation between Celtic countries. However, even leaving aside the problems of language posed, it is unlikely that coproduction could ever represent more than a tiny percentage of any country's output.

Other more pressing issues seemed to pose greater problems in terms of action. Given the importance of the BBC in support for regional and minority broadcasting in the UK, the failure to engage with the debate on the BBC's Charter renewal seemed particularly notable. Angela Graham, the independent Welsh producer of the impressive feature *Branwen*, which won the feature-length drama award, declared herself shocked by the complacency of many of the festival's speakers. She urged the Celtic Film and Television Association to adopt a more politicized, lobbying role. Margaret Conner, the Scottish representative of the European initiative Media Antenna, provided a helpful summary of current changes to European media policy. Whilst Media 2 seems to offer real potential to Celtic producers, given its stress on regional, small country and minority languages, she stressed that consultation and lobbying are needed to ensure there are sufficient measures to protect small producers,

who make up the majority of producers in Celtic countries. Again, this call for an organized response appeared to meet with little enthusiasm from the Association or delegates.

Although there was great stress laid on the importance of training throughout, there also seemed a lack of direction on how to go about developing skills in an environment of rapidly changing technologies and institutional changes. Discussions are ongoing between Scottish and Irish Gaels to support a new generation of writers, a welcome instance of joint activity and an initiative that John Angus Mackay of CTG described as crucial in developing a 'critical mass in cultural terms'. Important though this support is, critical mass must be recognized as primarily an industrial rather than creative necessity.

More telling still in terms of the gap between aspiration and actuality was the choice of Marcus Plantin, the new Network Director of ITV and consequently one of the most powerful men in British broadcasting, as keynote speaker. In a speech which, in its written form, suggested it was originally aimed at a very different audience from the small producers of the Celtic fringe, he waxed bullish about the success of ITV in the ratings wars. In the context of a festival which brought together people from many different national cultures, who nonetheless largely share a professional culture of motivated but small-scale filmmaking, his talk of audience shares and advertisers, most of all his insistence on the accessibility of the populist ITV network to all-comers, appeared to be in a different language.

Jane Sillars

Video Positive, Liverpool, 29 April–6 May 1995

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This festival is the largest biennial international festival of electronic arts in the

UK, and also, as the title claims, it is an extremely positive and vibrant event. Video Positive 95 (VP95) represents an important moment in the significant force that is currently driving visual culture forward. It does this by bringing together clusters of ideas, practices, theoreticians and practitioners around a programme of exhibitions which themselves are put together around the definitions of electronic imagery. The festival needs to be viewed as an entity, embracing visual and verbal, and electronic dialogue, with a broad-ranging audience. There are more than fifty events, including exhibitions, performances, broadcasts, screenings and seminars, involving over two hundred national and international artists, community and education projects, and radio transmissions, spread over ten venues in Liverpool. An indication of the wide sweep of debate which the emergent new forms of media demand is given by the programme of seminars which ran at the Tate Gallery. These were titled: 'Games of Art and War', 'Who's Looking at You?', 'Electronic Nation', 'Art, Science and the New Renaissance'. My experience of the Festival was limited to one sunny day and I looked at exhibitions without sampling any of these events.

That the festival is called Video Positive 95 is addressed in the director Eddie Berg's preface to the catalogue: 'The fragmentation and hybridizing of production, distribution and exhibition media means that many of the works at Video Positive 95 will have originated on video, computer or even film, but are presented on formats and platforms as diverse as Laserdisc, CD-ROM, Macintosh & Amiga computers, videophones, slide and even good old video itself' (p. 4).

This hybridizing of forms means that VP95 is a very rich and challenging series of exhibition experiences, and is therefore hard to evaluate in terms of the sum of its parts. 'Good old video' or video culture seems to be still alive and well, informing, as it does, the content and format of much of the work.

As a festival defined by technology, and having to its credit the fact that, as Lisa Haskel states in her Editor's Preface, VP95 'has not stayed tied to the restrictions of its history or its title' (p. 5), nonetheless it seems important not to lose sight of its connections to video art and culture given that there is a thirty-year history (increasingly well documented) of artists' work in video.

Critics of a festival of technology related to visual culture might want to ask if this festival is a celebration, and, if so, what of? Do these forms of technology particularly related to the visual and the sensory threaten to destroy or to make strange our previously 'natural' ways of seeing?

The two parallel introductory essays to the festival catalogue make much of the shift from the empirical endeavour of science and art to represent the natural world, to the seeming abandonment of natural truths through the techniques of virtual reality and computer simulation. The natural is no longer the benchmark of truth. Technology, technological advances and new techniques of picturing reality offer us insights into how our culture thinks its way through nature. In a sense, these practices expand the history of representation, connecting the postmodern abandonment of Nature to a concern with one of the previous sites of the natural – the body. A theme common to much of the work on show is the body 'with artists both trying to construct nature in the machine and interfacing the machine with the body' (Haskel, p. 10). Regarded in this way, the festival, with its blurring of boundaries between art and science, nature and culture, body and machine, is a reflection upon a current phase of history in which visual truth is undergoing a radical investigation.

With the development of synthetic environments, virtual reality and electronic galleries on the Web and Internet, the festival is an opportunity to assess how the culture is developing and to review its products. Methods and formats, degrees and modes of

artifice, techniques and processes, electronic paint as and against oil paint, electronically generated illusion of three-dimensional space as against graphic representation – all are parts of a newly contested territory. There may be fears of usurpment, of a new culture taking over and dominating the old, of corruption of previous forms, of hijacking and distortion. A conclusive and somewhat optimistic remark is offered by Erkki Huhtamo, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Lapland, to the effect that ‘media art is a process of proliferation and creative synthesis, rather than one of substitution. Artistic explorations of computer networks and new multimedia platforms, such as CD-ROM, does not make site-specific and ‘gallery art’ obsolete, but it certainly affects its nature and strategies’ (p. 12).

As a reflection on the emergence of new media forms and their uses, the diversity of work in VP95 is stunning, and confusing. A number of questions came to mind after a day spent viewing the work. What could be read from the plurality of cultures and the diversity of work in VP95? What or where is the appropriate space for viewing electronic work? Who are the primary audiences for this type of work? What are the implications for the different types of interactivity that are being employed by the artists?

Showing work in such varied spaces and galleries highlights the way in which the context is a key determinant in reading and interpreting work. What was particularly interesting was that, for once, notoriety was not an overly deterministic selection criteria. ‘Famous artists’ like Lynn Hershman were given space outside the Tate, and relative ‘newcomers’ like Stephanie Smith and Edward Stewart were inside.

The Tate Gallery as the major site for the exhibition lent a particular authority and gravity to some of the work installed there, which in other spaces communicated differently. For instance, the much reported video ‘Intercourse’ by Smith and Stewart was

placed in the Tate, whilst a new work by Keith Piper, ‘Reckless Eyeballing’, receiving its world premiere, was installed at The Bluecoat Gallery. The latter is a gallery whose approach and context is less formal, and some would say more user-friendly, than the imposing Tate of the North. As a spectator it was hard to see why certain works were at the Tate and others were not. Arguably the work by Keith Piper, which features a massive screen divided up into segmented images, plus two full-size lecterns with lamps and ramps leading to them, required a gallery to itself. However, the work may have benefited from the sort of official sanctioning of the Big Gallery. The politics of the location of exhibited work may be as much an issue as the content of the work itself for the organizers of VP95.

Further critical distinctions were made between work made by authors/artists and that made by collaborative partnerships formed between community groups and artists. The latter were shown in the Grand Hall on Albert Dock, a short distance from the Tate. This literal and physical segregation is of particular concern because the democratization of media forms is an issue at the heart of the debates around new technologies. If curatorial practice itself remains unchallenged by uses of new media, then a vital part of the ‘new’ culture is being overlooked. At The Grand Hall, the work displayed a purposefulness that the Tate solo shows perhaps lacked. ‘Even As We Speak’, by BICA – Black Issues in Community Arts – working with Asian people from Tameside, used video, electronic manipulation, text and music to ‘reflect both the common consciousness of the group and individual ideas. Using themes of identity, media stereotypes’ (p. 41). The tangibility of ‘real’ people, and the use of sensitive and visually pleasing camera work which pans in closeup on the faces of the people talking about their experience, combined in an effective piece of work which was uncompromising in its directness and surely

significant for being described as the first Asian participation in a VP Festival. 'The World in Our Eyes', by The Citadel Project, used electronic images and computer animation in a collaboration between young adults with learning disabilities from special schools with the artist Sara Furneaux, and resulted in two fluted wooden boxes lined with mirrors which multiplied the image from the television monitor inside, producing a kaleidoscopic effect. As a piece of work it demonstrated a voice and a clarity of purpose in communicating how new media can be aids to the creation of flights of fantasy and pleasure which effectively go beyond the frozen image into a world of simulated time and movement, shape and colour. This is, perhaps, a relatively simple approach to using new media; however, the pursuit of simple pleasure seems a legitimate one.

How the spectator gains access to the work, and the way in which she/he forms a relationship to it, is a key issue. Theories of spectatorship have to be readdressed in the light of interactivity. The agency the spectator has in the work by being able to mechanically control and shape her/his viewing experience is a form of intervention which has no precedent. Curiously, interactivity may push electronically based work closer to the boundaries of architecture since there is no necessarily defined point from which to view the image (or have the experience). Sean Cubitt refers to 'this new architectural spirit in electronic arts (which) propels . . . to the foreground not what the art is, but what it does, and how what it does is transformed by its visitors' (p. 14).

In several of the venues exhibits were in the form of CD-ROM, inviting the spectator to sit or stand at a computer terminal and use a tracker ball or mouse to navigate their way around a programme. The Toy Box on display in the Tate Gallery was one such on offer. In 1994, Moviola, who operate and run VP95, invited artists to submit ideas for inclusion in The Toy Box. Twenty small-scale interactive

artworks were subsequently accepted and published on CD-ROM, thus allowing people to buy the disc (which includes a profile of previous festivals and a guide to the current one) and to view the work independently in other circumstances, outside of and beyond the festival period.

In the case of Graham Harwood's 'Rehearsal of Memory', shown at The Bluecoat Gallery, the interactive element meant that each person activated the work using a control stick to move over the huge projected computer image, selecting forward, back, up and down by clicking on parts of the image. Harwood worked in collaboration with staff and patients at Ashworth Hospital. Out of their experiences, a fictitious personality was created and represented by spoken text and image, harsh closeups of skin and body fragments mixed with a driving music soundtrack. In Harwood's piece, the viewing distance from harrowing disclosures of sexual abuse and physical violence permits a margin of safety from the force of the text, whilst also reinforcing the sense that we are playing with an abstraction of the, albeit fictional, data of someone's traumatic experience. The piece is a powerful indictment of the brutalization of experience through objectification and, by extension, an indictment of the workings of certain forms of social control.

The viewer who chooses her/his own route through the programme in this way is watched by others and becomes the guide or mediator for the work to a larger audience. How does it feel to be watched watching? How does it feel not to be in a private meditation one to one with the image? Strange. Exposing. Uncomfortable. Questions about self-consciousness arise. Am I doing it right? Should I move on? What will people think of me if I am seen to be more interested in this rather than that?

A different interactive experience was offered by 'Resonance of 4' by Toshio Iwai at the Bluecoat. The work consisted of an interactive audiovisual installation of video

projections of coloured grids, linked to computers. Four people could create one musical composition in cooperation with each other. By using a mouse and watching a chequer board filled with coloured squares of light at their feet, the players clicked on the squares to determine pitch and timing in their part of the music. The result was anything from musical harmony to chaos, depending upon how the players listened to each other and how they used the controls. In a darkened space, the lure of softly blinking colours and the reedy synthesized music was mesmerizing. The content seemed to point toward some notion of working for harmony through the universal language of interactivity via the machine. A pleasant and beguiling day dream perhaps?

A set of interesting questions develop from the uses of interactive media; how much control does the viewer have given that they are operating within the closed system of a pre-programmed work?; does the artist manipulate the spectator, or the spectator the artist?; when the spectator literally gets their hands on the work, do they in part also become its maker?; does the software become the content? There is also a question over levels of practical proficiency. Inevitably some people's familiarity with using a programme and the clicking and pointing tools is better developed than others. Many people expect very rapid responses from what they are interacting with. If something is not delivered within five seconds the viewer may move on! The facility to treat interactive 'art' in the same manner as a game suggests a need to examine the cross-fertilization of viewing practices and habits. It may also be true that, as Sean Cubitt says in the catalogue, 'Precious few works are as interesting as the applications they are written on' (p. 13).

Only time will tell how access, production and consumption of electronic media develop and impact upon visual culture. In the meantime, Video Positive will continue as an annual event. A very useful aspect of the

festival is that it offers a meeting point between different disciplines within the visual arts, while for students and educationalists it promises to establish a bridging point between Fine Art and Film and Television Studies. The challenges to previously existing beliefs are clearly going to be significant – there is a lot of fun to be had yet!

Michèle Fuirer

17th International Festival of Women's Films, Créteil, 1995

If cinema is one hundred years old, then Créteil can be relied upon first to prove just how closely involved women were with its origins, and second to ensure their place in its future. Accordingly, the oldest film made by a woman shown at Créteil this year was made around 1896, and showed the Lumière brothers' visit to Budapest (*Lumière* [Katalin Vaneck, Hungary]). This film was part of an archival section on early women pioneers containing around fifty-five films by over thirty-five directors from fourteen different countries. In an international critical context, this presentation of so many early women filmmakers severely challenges the 'male-dominated' canon of present-day film history; meanwhile, in the context of the festival, the dissatisfactions which usually make up our annual review are displaced, as Créteil emerges as a space to be cherished for its unwavering determination to make visible the place of women in cinema's history.

Having suggested in earlier reviews that the festival was torn between commercial and political agendas, these divisions still remain unresolved, with the archival section, one of the most critically important sections this year, being also the least well attended and most financially draining. Elsewhere the commercial/political division is equally apparent, with the utopian vision of Gillian Armstrong's *Little Women* (US, 1994)

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contrasting harshly with the arresting images of a 'Femmes, Islam ou Traditions' special section. The screening of *Little Women* at Créteil illustrates just how much context can change a film: in the male dominated world of the mainstream multiplexes *Little Women* evokes an ideal world of female bonding and feminist insight, where women can have their 'freshly baked scone' and eat it. However, in the Créteil milieu the film seems strangely conformist and the audience seemed largely bemused by this clinical tale of Victorian New England.

Meanwhile, the 'Femmes, Islam ou traditions' section mentioned above aimed to engage with current debates over the plight of women living in countries divided by religion. The opening film, *Le Démon au Féminin* (Algeria, 1993) by novelist Hafsa Zinai Koudil, deals explicitly with the situation in Algeria and set the tone for a series of heated after-screening debates.

The problem of women's position in warring societies, which formed the main object of debate in the above section, found its way into other films. An entry in the short film competition deconstructs the representation of women as nonviolent which dictates her position in situations such as the above. *Mein Feind/My Enemy* (Bettina Flittner, Germany, 1993) records the reactions of Saturday shoppers in Köln, Germany to a series of life-size posters of women, each of whom holds a weapon and tells of who their enemy is and how she would kill him/her. The meeting of art (the posters) with the public (the shoppers) creates a film which is humorous, entertaining, enlightening and thought provoking, and certainly seemed to leave a strong impression upon all who saw it, the proof being that it won the public prize for best foreign short.

A more surprising prize winner was *Welcome to the Terrordome* (Ngosi Onwurah, UK, 1995), an entry in the Young Jury's competition. This film was originally invited on the condition that the director would attend

to defend the politics of her picture; that she did not is a shame, as this is a film which one feels needs explanation, discussion and justification more than any other. The furore which this film caused among the Black community in Britain ('unimaginably bad and politically repugnant', Paul Gilroy, *Sight and Sound*, February 1995) is almost enough to persuade one to find at least one redeeming feature; as it happens, this critic found several. For one, the 'Black British' address of the film seemed to stretch itself out to other ethnic groups; the Terrordome, a place of segregation where the police are the enemy became a Rio de Janeiro for some, a horror version of Washington for other US viewers. It is easy to abhor the seemingly overt messages of violence and segregation, yet for this viewer that is the emotive 'trick' of the film, as it prompts one to wrap oneself up in one's own political feelings. Once distance is applied, alternative narratives emerge, within which some characters, although none are truly developed, stand out as carriers of the fight for life: the sister who shoots up heroin but tries to defend the 'Snow White' who was pregnant with a black baby; Snow White herself, whose plight is given as much scope in the film as the climactic extermination of the black mother who had lost her son and killed white police. (In one of the most graphic and shocking scenes of the film the pregnant mother is caused to have a miscarriage by her jealous, white ex-boyfriend. Given this scene alone, it is incredible that the organizers of the festival could have proposed this film for a young – barely teenage – jury). Terrordome is a place of no place, of transition. In the end the slaves rise from the sea bed, leave Terrordome and march onto the land, claiming it as the new home. The future is uncertain, yet dignified.

A mid-afternoon audience received with cries of 'degeulasse/disgusting' a short film which could be described as a 'teenage' Barbara Hammer. *I'm a Grrrr!* (Bynke Maiboll Duchin, Denmark, 1994) featured a rhythmic

soundtrack by The Cramps which set the tone of the film as irreverent and playful. Black and white, low-grade images of women doing unspeakable things with telephones, and bare-breasted nuns posing in chapels, were intercut with a more 'structuralist' sequence in which a line of naked women – of all shapes and sizes – pull tampons from themselves. More popular (though far less provocative) was this year's 'hip lesbian romance' provided by Patricia Rozema in her new film *When Night is Falling* (Canada, 1995) which won the public prize for best feature. In this, her third feature, Rozema returns to the formula of her debut film *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987). The new film also engages with a specific French-Canadian milieu (in this case a Protestant college) has lesbianism as its twist and serves up a disappointing 'fantasy' ending. The different receptions for *I'm a Grrrl* and *When Night is Falling* prove, once again, the unpredictability of the Créteil audience.

The different audiences at Créteil are matched by the growing diversity of the women's films now shown here. Given the considerable element of chance which goes into the programming and selection, it is always amazing when recurring themes emerge. Thus in 1995, many of the feature films in competition defined the stages of their narratives by passing through landscapes. County Durham becomes the main location and protagonist of *Eden Valley*, a film by Amber Collective and this year's winning feature, while *Silent Witness* (Harriet Wichin, Canada, 1994) documents a return to Auschwitz.

Also in this category was the documentary *Dorothea Lange – A Visual Life* (Meg Partridge, US, 1994) which focuses on one of the most fascinating photographers of social observation. In this film, winner of the documentary Jury prize, the director presents us with the photographs taken by the first photographer to work for US government agencies who were aiming to catch the reality

of US living. What becomes apparent from the photographs, the interview with her son and her assistant, and the taped recollections of the artist herself, is the implicit connection she makes between people and the land. Her fascination for, and respect of, both is enforced in her belief that the consent and cooperation of her 'objects' were necessary for her photos – to take without asking would be like catching the living spirit of the people.

Alice Guy, the subject of a study last year, was returned to in more detail in the section 'Pioneers of yesterday and today'. Along with four 'singing' films which used the chronophone to record the male singer's voice, then synched with his performance, were featured *Madame a des envies* and *La Vie du Christ* both made in 1906. The former can be counted as perhaps the first film sympathetic to pregnancy. A heavily pregnant woman out walking with her husband is seized by irrepressible cravings which involve her in stealing the food of the people she passes. The film also recalls *La Fée au chou* (1896) as, finally exhausted, the woman sits down by a cabbage patch, then returns to her feet having lost her 'lump' and picks up a baby from one of the cabbages.

The 'woman's film' resonances, so strong in *Madame a des envies*, are less evident in *La Vie du Christ*; instead, another aesthetic asset of the female gaze could be excavated from this lavish tableau-pic. The story of Christ more often than not is upstaged by the decorative elements: belly-dancers and oriental trimmings come across as much more fascinating, and the plight of the son of God, a well-known narrative, is subverted by baroque spectacle.

One of the most pleasurable and 'pioneering' choices in this section was the rediscovery of Asta Nielsen, the Greta Garbo of the continent. After her first appearance in Urban Gad's *The Abyss* (1910), Hollywood beckoned, yet it was to Berlin that she went and was made a star. This Danish actress whom Appollinaire adored and George

Brandes called 'the moss ross' – the rarest of them all – played whores, mothers, lovers and mad women. She was Wedekind's Lulu for Leopold Jessner, and had her greatest comedy success in the delightful *The Angel*, as a teenager in love (a recent success when shown at the 'Femme Totale' festival in Dortmund). Her autobiography: 'The 10th Muse' has been a bestseller, yet nowadays her contribution to the art of film seems to have been forgotten. In screening her contrasting performances in *Sins of Mankind* (1927) as a cocaine-addicted mother, and as a young 'flapper' journalist in *According to the Law* (1919), Créteil paid homage to this once legendary, brilliant and versatile early cinema star.

Another name who seems to be little known outside of her own country is the German director Lotte Reininger. This year she was honoured as the first person to create a feature-length animation film. Ten years before the beginnings of Walt Disney, she animated *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1923–6), a beautiful and fantastic shadow play, which features elaborate cutouts of oriental Princes and Princesses, an ogress, a wizard and grand ornamental crowd scenes. Having mentioned the lack of audience for many of these pioneer films, it was therefore an added pleasure to watch this film with a whole class of ten-year-olds who sat enraptured after being told that 'when they grow up, they might remember this film and truly appreciate what was made possible for them to see'. This extraordinary scenario – school children as the main audience for a rare, archive woman's film – is just one of the contradictions of a festival such as Créteil.

Not all of the films in this section were necessarily 'early', thus many of those featured came from the 1930s, 1940s or even 1950s, the criterion being that they were newly discovered and thus rarely seen before. In this category one can place two British films: *Rugged Island* (Jenny Gilbertson, Scotland, 1933) and *Magic Mixies* (Mary Field, UK, 1931). The first was a docudrama

in which the small croft community is presented between the sea and the land, assaulted and nourished by both. A scene of the rescue of a sheep caught under a cliff by the incoming tide encapsulates both the labour and the momentary beauty of life. The final decision of the film is made by Richard and Enga, non-actors like Eisenstein's people. They will leave for Australia, but not before the survival of the small community is secured, the old folk cared for and balance restored. *Magic Mixies* is a delightful 'nature' documentary which explores the strange lives of the eponymous biological oddity that is half vegetable, half animal. The style of the film includes the use of microphotography which reveals landscapes and worlds the size of water drops in truly magical and abstract shapes.

Having begun by talking of early pioneers it seems appropriate to end with new pioneers, which Créteil featured for the second time in a section on 'nouvelles images'. This section included computer animation and graphics, 3-D images and images controlled by robots. What was extraordinary was the way in which computers, calculations and mathematical formulae – all techniques which dehumanize the creative process – had been used to create extremely expressive and tactile images. The films in this section did not tell stories, instead they gave us situations, possibilities, opportunities which were then explored, often seeming to go beyond the norms of perception and into the mind, or the images we would find there.

For example, Evangelina Sirgado de Sousa, (from Bournemouth University) in *Just Water* (UK, 1994), calculates abstract mathematical formulae to create floating sheets of water which hang in voids and glisten in thousands of colours. Or, in *Exercises on Landscape* (UK, 1993), she flirts with the interplay of time and space by taking us on a journey through trees, roots and soil. The discussions which followed this section provided some of the most stimulating listening, as the

'directors' of the films explained how the effects were produced and put forward their own manifestos as to the future of these new 'technologies'.

Given the tendency to celebrate cinema's centenary through a nostalgic, retrospective

look into cinema's 'glorious', patriarchal past, it was refreshing that Créteil should celebrate instead with a positive image of its future, in which the presence of women is fully assured.

Cathy Fowler and Petra Küppers

reviews

review:

Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (1947). London: The Athlone Press, 1994, 171pp.

Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, 396pp.

George Burt, *The Art of Film Music*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994, 266pp.

Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 239pp.

ROBYNN STILWELL

These four publications – three recent books and one reprinted ‘classic’ – all explore what and how we hear at the movies, perhaps the most difficult facet of film to address. The limitations of language, conditioned by the visual bias of human perception, render our vocabulary for dealing with sound remarkably imprecise, even that vocabulary associated with sound’s more disciplined subset, music. Western music’s development and the aesthetic theories surrounding it have placed a high priority on its ‘rational’, quantifiable components: pitch, harmony, form and, to some extent, rhythm. Therefore, other elements of music are notably underendowed with terminology, specifically some of those most directly relevant to film music: timbre, sonority, texture, and the more complex aspects of rhythm.

Film music scholars have long protested the ‘neglect’ of film music, but the problem is not so much neglect as ghettoization. A substantial amount *has* been written on film music,¹ but it tends to be largely inaccessible and written from the fringes of both film studies and

¹ See Martin Marks, ‘Film music: the material, literature, and present state of research’, *Notes*, vol. 36 (1979), pp. 282–325; and my forthcoming, ‘Film music literature since 1980: a critical review’, *The Journal of Film Music*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1995).

musicology. In some sense, all four books reviewed here seek to redress this problem.

Both George Burt and Royal S. Brown explicitly seek to bring film and music together, albeit addressing opposite ends of the filmmaking process, production and reception. Burt addresses filmmakers and composers, while Brown's audience is film scholars and musicologists.

Royal S. Brown's *Overtones and Undertones* is the latest (and longest) of a number of recent books combining a theoretically-oriented history of film music with detailed analyses. Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), Caryl Flinn's *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Kathryn Kalinak's *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) are all similarly structured, but because of the focused nature of their distinctly scholarly approach (all three originated as the authors' doctoral dissertations), they do not have Brown's scope. He is equally at home discussing films by Robbe-Grillet, Vincente Minnelli and the Monkees, and he addresses all sorts of musical processes in film, from classical and avant-garde scores to pop song compilations. This open-mindedness is a real rarity in the often insular world of film music, but breadth also means that some focus is missing, a problem exacerbated by the fact that large chunks of the book originated as individual articles.

The major drawback of Brown's book, however, is that the author – who explicitly does not presuppose any musical knowledge on the part of his audience – appears to have a rather shaky knowledge of music himself. He frequently makes statements that may sound quite profound, or at least perfectly plausible, to someone with little or no musical background, but are in fact either mind-numbingly obvious to a musician ('prominent passages of parallel upward and downward movement [which, paradoxically, can be elaborated only in the music's horizontal movement]' [p. 168]) or are dangerously misleading. In one of his most influential arguments, Brown links the minor–major seventh chord with irrationality in Bernard Herrmann's Hitchcock scores, placing a great deal of weight on the need of this chord to resolve. Yet since the developments of Debussy (whose harmonic language was a profound influence on Herrmann) and jazz, such extended chords are frequently planed, sliding in parallel motion, with no harmonic direction in the tonal sense, therefore no need to resolve. Brown also overstates the similarity between the minor–major seventh (a minor third above the root plus two major thirds) and an augmented triad (two major thirds), for even a trained listener will find it difficult across the discontinuity of a film cue to hear a chord as missing its root – a chord is *defined* by its root. This weakness in musical conception is also evident in Brown's statement that 'melody is the most rational element of music' (p. 154). What he should say is

that *tonality* is the most rational element: melody and harmony must both conform to tonality, the syntactical process of western music that demands resolution. Therefore tonality is the higher order of the 'rationality' Brown is proposing (although, it must be said, that the 'rationality' of tonality is arbitrary, established largely through convention).

Despite the musical drawbacks, breadth is not the book's only strength. In his historical overview, Brown does not merely recapitulate what so many others have said, and his discussion of silent film is refreshingly quirky. He also makes some provocative observations that one wishes he had pursued further, for instance the paradox that:

the larger the ensemble playing the nondiegetic score the more 'invisible' this score can become, since the full symphony orchestra, with its numerous tone colors and its big sound, has a greater potential for translating musical sounds into subliminal affect (p. 59).

What makes the smaller ensemble so prominent? Is it timbral, cultural or psychological? Is it the sheer strangeness, the purity of a single timbre, the intimacy of the audible breath of a wind player, the chance of the musician making a mistake? These are questions to which there are no answers without some empirical research, but a little speculation, clearly marked, would not have gone amiss.

Unlike many in film music studies, Brown is sensitive to nuances of gender and the presence of the author in an analysis. He notes that Claudia Gorbman chose a film with a female hero (*Mildred Pierce*) to illustrate classical Hollywood practice, while he chose one with a male hero (although obviously there are far more films with male heroes than female heroes). 'Although I feel that I picked *The Sea Hawk* because of the quality of both its music and the film/music interaction', he says, 'the privileged viewpoint seems inescapable!' (p. 359, n. 11).

Brown's is a sprawling, untidy, frustrating, provocative book aimed at scholars who, one might say cynically, have the time and the intellectual inclination for it. Composers and filmmakers, on the other hand, might demand something more streamlined. George Burt's *The Art of Film Music* is easily the most sophisticated such book to date.² Burt goes beyond the basics of music and the mechanics of fitting score to film, and sets out to explore how music actually shapes perception of a narrative, including characterization (of individuals, groups, emotions, and ambience), the articulation of time, and the manipulation of tension and release, with detailed analysis of sequences from classic Hollywood films.

Burt has an ingenious solution to a perennial problem of film music literature – the disparity in the musical knowledge of his audience. Technical musical descriptions are put in italics and brackets so that

2 Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright's *On the Track: A Guide to Contemporary Film Scoring* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989) is an exemplary textbook, but it is specifically for composers, rather than filmmakers.

those who do not understand music can skip over them without losing continuity; the musical examples are very nicely produced and well chosen, although the rubrics indicating dialogue, action, camera action, and so on – all valuable information – are presented all at the same level, undifferentiated, making a clear impression difficult to gain without some digging.

Although the book as a whole is impressive, Burt's discussion of musical characterization is rather impressionistic. He describes the melody for a seductress:

In a beguiling manner, it moves through a circuitous harmonic progression with apparent ease and grace. It avoids large intervallic leaps, and its breezy melodic contour fits and indeed enlarges upon both the situation and her enticing qualities (p. 18).

He comes tantalizingly close to making meaningful connections between musical traits and characterization, but he retreats into frustratingly vague language that, in the end, means almost nothing. Similarly, he carries on a rather extensive discussion about a chromatic 'seductress' melody and a diatonic 'good girl' melody, but never explicitly makes the obvious connotative connection between chromaticism and sexuality, or the moral judgment attached to them.

A certain looseness in terminology emerges as Burt discusses Eisenstein's theories of the contrapuntal relationship between image and music. Burt argues that the two media cannot be truly contrapuntal, then goes off on a tangent about *musical* contrapuntal form. He also states that

a problem arises in how we perceive the relationship between music and film. . . . In combined music and film, one voice – that of film – is of overriding delineation with respect to literary information, drama, and pictures. Another voice – the music – is subtle, abstract, and symbolic (p. 9).

Burt seems to be confusing 'film' with purely visual elements. Where are sound effects and dialogue in this formulation? Of course, one could count them as carriers of 'information' and 'drama', but they could equate just as easily with the music – beyond the sheer technical fact that sound effects, dialogue, and music all reside on the soundtrack, they frequently interact meaningfully, as even Burt himself explores in his thoughtful chapter on 'The sound and function of silence: when music is absent'.

The collaboration between sound and vision is largely ignored in both film and film music studies, but Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision* could focus attention at this crucial point in the signification process. Chion was a student of the pioneering French electronic composer Pierre Schaeffer, whose theoretical constructs have particularly influenced Chion's approach to film sound. Translated by Claudia Gorbman into extremely lucid English, *Audio-Vision* is not a book

about film music *per se*, but embraces the entire sound-world of a film, a synthesis and expansion of the French theorist's previous (as yet untranslated) work on sound in cinema.

The inability of normal language to fully address sound is implicated in the profusion of neologisms and analogies in Chion's discussion. While I generally dislike the burgeoning of jargon, Chion's concepts, at least, deserve critical attention, and this remarkably impoverished area of language could probably do with some help.

Among the new terms, we find the title of the book itself. 'Audio-vision' is a specific perceptual mode of reception, the interactive transformation of one element by the other. Other terms refine this relationship. 'Synchresis' (synchronism + synthesis) welds a sound to a simultaneous action, whether or not there is actually a causal relationship. Drawing on Schaeffer's concept of 'acousmatic' sound (sound from a source we cannot see), Chion also theorizes an '*acousmètre*', or acousmatic being, one who has a specific kind of ambiguity in relationship to the screen, neither inside nor outside the image – Mrs Bates in *Psycho*, for instance, or the Wizard of Oz.

Although Chion's analogic terminology is almost completely drawn from music, he wisely warns that it should be used cautiously. He challenges the conventional 'parallel/counterpoint' schema and argues that perhaps 'dissonance' is a better term than 'counterpoint' for a seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of sound and image. While this may indeed be true, it does tend to overstress vertical (simultaneous) interaction of sound and image. At any one moment, the 'dissonance' may be most striking, but I would argue that we tend to perceive scenes or sequences as phrases or movements, which may have movements of dissonance, but also, we may extrapolate, 'consonance' – synchronization (kinetic, rhythmic) and/or parallelism (semiotic, affective). For 'consonance', Chion uses the term 'synch points', which again suggests a quite localized vertical event; however, one may extrapolate yet another musical analogy – that of the cadence, for he explicitly creates an analogy between false synch points and deceptive cadences. As in music, the interaction of dissonance and consonance generates horizontal interaction, resulting in form.

In exchange for the appropriation of musical terms, Chion, perhaps unwittingly, offers much to film music studies in his generalized theorizations on sound. One particular operation of sound – the temporalization of the image – is particularly suited to music, for the very reasons outlined above. Chion proposed three types of temporalization: animation, rendering the perception of time in the image as exact, vague, erratic, and so on; linearization, providing a sense of succession; and temporal vectorization, dramatizing shots, orienting them toward a future.³

The projection of sound on image also gives 'added value':

³ Claudia Widgery 'The kinetic and temporal interaction of music and film: three documentaries of 1930's America' (Dissertation: University of Maryland College Park, 1990) explores specifically musical temporalization of film.

the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image (p. 5).

This concept of 'added value' seems particularly apt for music. Certainly such advocates of cinematic 'counterpoint' as Eisenstein would argue that the apparent divergence of music and image is a uniquely filmic generator of meaning, but the greatest implication for film music may lie in the other side of the formulation, the apparent replication of meaning. In classical Hollywood practice, music was supposed to be 'inaudible', giving the '(eminently incorrect) impression that' it was 'unnecessary'. Yet one could argue that music that 'duplicates' the image frequently 'in reality brings about' the meaning. A simple example would be a closeup of a face with the eyebrows slightly knitted: what is that person thinking? Is she worried, irritated, perplexed, frustrated, near-sighted? Of course, nuances of the eyes and mouth will tell us a lot, but the chances are that the music will tell us much more.

In the campaign against duplication, certainly no one has argued more aggressively than the authors of a book frequently characterized as the only truly serious book about music and film. It is nearly fifty years since the first publication of Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler's seminal book *Composing for the Films*, almost half the entire historical span of film. The book has had, since its original appearance in 1947, an aura of greatness which – not to detract from its obvious erudition and the sincerity of its noble intent (to rescue film music from the foul clutches of capitalism) – may stem more from who wrote it than from what it says. Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno were both refugees from Nazi Germany living in Los Angeles, but they could not have been more different. Eisler was a composer, a long-time collaborator with Bertolt Brecht, and political activist who also composed Hollywood film scores, whereas Adorno, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School, was a cultural theorist who felt that political activity was reactionary posturing. Their book is understandably filled with internal tension and is undeniably cranky in tone.

It seems that the one point on which Eisler and Adorno could agree was the wretchedness of Hollywood film practice. A number of the points that they raise are valid and insightful, particularly regarding the historical development of film music. They rightly point out that this development was more technological than stylistic, and that the

aesthetics had been formalistic, the product of practice rather than theory. Their attack on the uniformity of the sound of film music – largely conditioned by executives understandably reluctant to underutilize the numbers of musicians kept on studio rosters due to union rules – was certainly apposite, although one could point out such composers as Bernard Herrmann who still managed to create unique sounds by manipulating the means at hand.

In fact, some of Adorno's and Eisler's arguments in themselves seem to impede music's development. While protesting composers' 'unjustifiable oversimplification of musical language' for the vagaries of the microphone, the authors define 'musical material in the proper meaning of the term' as 'the tones and their relationships' (p. 64). This, to me, is an unconscionable impoverishment of musical means, certainly excluding timbre, dynamics, and probably even texture and orchestration. In the 1930s, Herrmann, Aaron Copland and Duke Ellington, among others, were experimenting with the possibilities of music composed specifically with the microphone in mind, using its technical limitations to exploit hitherto unexploitable resources of instrumental colour. But Adorno, particularly, seems blinkered to qualities of music at any level other than the structural. His critiques of jazz and popular music are well known, but in *Composing for the Films*, we find the incredible statement that:

It is as difficult to distinguish between the temperamental characters of Polish and Spanish dances, particularly in the conventionalized form they assumed in the nineteenth century, as it is to discern the difference between hill-billy songs and Upper Bavarian *Schnaderhüpferln* (p. 14).

I would venture to say that this reflects more on Adorno's ear than the music's distinctiveness.

While the appeal for the use of 'new' (read modernist, preferably twelve-tone) music is perfectly reasonable, the arguments are unremittingly elitist. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno had stated that 'The elitist segregation of the avant-garde is not art's fault but society's'; in the new introduction to *Composing for the Films*, Graham McCann defends Adorno with the statement, 'One should not confuse a depressing realism with an unjustified pessimism' (p. xxxii). But this is merely an excuse, like Adorno's stance on political action, to opt out; if segregation is society's fault, then artists, like spoiled brats, are free to take their toys and retreat to play in their own yard.

This segregation is extended to music and film. The arguments continually resist integration of the music with other cinematic elements. There is an apparent assumption that integration automatically leads to redundancy, hence the stress on structure and autonomy for film music; though structure may be desirable, even necessary for autonomous music, music in film is by definition not autonomous. Therefore, structure may in fact impose a rigidity on the

music at odds with the flexibility demanded by film. The insistence on music as a serious art, 'transform[ing] the indolence, dreaminess, and dullness of the ear into a matter of concentration, effort, and serious work' (p. 30), reflects a moralistic strain that makes the elitism all the more patronizing.

One of the most frequently quoted parts of the Adorno/Eisler argument against the then-current Hollywood practice of the 1940s revolves around the use of leitmotifs. The authors deplore the use of leitmotifs because it betrays the dramatic intentions of Richard Wagner, whose concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total/complete art work) has often been transferred from opera to film:

The fundamental character of the leitmotif – its salience and brevity – was related to the gigantic dimensions of the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian music dramas. Just because the leitmotif as such is musically rudimentary, it requires a large musical canvas if it is to take on a *structural meaning beyond that of a signpost*. The atomization of the musical element is paralleled by the heroic dimensions of the composition. . . . This relation is entirely absent in the motion picture, which requires continual interruption of one element by another rather than continuity . . . (p. 5, emphasis mine).

This paragraph makes two assumptions about the nature of musical form, both related to Adorno's elitism and his obsession with autonomy. The first assumption is that structural meaning is somehow elevated beyond structure itself. How does one define musical form if not through a series of signposts (themes, cadences, transitions . . .)? The second assumption is that various elements of film do not interact, they merely interrupt each other. Therefore, the space between cues is an absence of music rather than a presence of silence (or dialogue, sound effects or action). Further,

The Wagnerian leitmotif is inseparably connected with the symbolic nature of the music drama. The leitmotif is not supposed merely to characterize persons, emotions, or things, although this is the prevalent conception. Wagner conceived its purpose as the endowment of the dramatic events with metaphysical significance. When in the Ring the tubas blare the Valhalla motif, it is not merely to indicate the dwelling place of Wotan. Wagner meant also to connote the sphere of sublimity, the cosmic will, and the primal principle. The leitmotif was invented essentially for this kind of symbolism. There is no place for it in the motion picture, which seeks to depict reality. Here the function of the leitmotif has been reduced to the level of a musical lackey, who announces his master with an important air even though the eminent personage is clearly recognizable to everyone. The effective technique of the past thus becomes a mere duplication, ineffective and uneconomical (pp. 5–6).

Much of this merely exalts Wagner's conceptions of music drama to fact, as if because Wagner intended music to have such a mystical power, it automatically did. Conversely, it also denies that power to anything that doesn't have the stamp of high art. The key word here is 'connote'. The Valhalla motif connotes primal power. But David Raksin's theme for the title character in *Laura* (1944) not only 'announces' Laura, frequently when she is not even onscreen, it connotes a sensual, sophisticated, yet sweet character. Raksin's conception of Laura actually overrides director Otto Preminger's image of this self-assured, successful businesswoman as a whore – the very opposite of duplication.

In his disappointingly pedestrian new introduction to *Composing for the Films*, Graham McCann states that, 'Today . . . the book continues to stand alone as an intelligent analysis of the social, political and aesthetic significance of movie music' (p. viii). It seems remarkable that this argument continues to be used. Even before 1947, there were 'intelligent' books on film music – the writings of composer/theorist Hans Erdmann come particularly to mind. Certainly in the last fifteen years there have been a number of books which address political, social, psychological, aesthetic and musical issues in various emphases: in addition to Gorbman, Flinn and Kalinak cited above, Helga de la Motte-Haber and Hans Emons's *Filmmusik: Eine systematische Beschreibung* (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980), Wolfgang Thiel's *Filmmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1981) and others. *Composing for the Films* is an important book, surely, but less a monolithic statement than an intriguing historical document.

Although Adorno's and Eisler's book carries the weight of history (and two very big names) and Burt and Brown offer welcome additions to the literature, I cannot help but feel that Chion's is the book which *could* offer the most to the field of film music. 'Audiovisual analysis is descriptive analysis', says Chion. '[It] should avoid any symbolizing interpretation of a psychoanalytic, psychological, social, or political nature. Interpretation may, of course, follow, based on the findings of the analysis.' This separation of analysis and interpretation is the key to a sound (no pun intended) approach to film: an approach which does not eliminate one or the other, but focuses on each in turn. Studies of film music frequently suffer from a methodological imbalance: interpretation without analysis, which is often insubstantial or conjectural, or analysis without interpretation, which can easily become an exercise in musical bean-counting. Music does not exist in film autonomously; it is part of an intricate web of signification, richly interacting with image, dialogue and sound effects. Any analysis of a film must include its soundtrack; likewise, any analysis of film *music* must address the *film*.

review:

Sandra Frieden, Richard W. McCormick, Vibeke R. Petersen, Laurie Melissa Vogelsang (eds), *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions*. Providence and Oxford: Berg, 1993, volume I, 332pp., volume II, 361pp.

ERICA CARTER

Among critics writing from an Anglo-American perspective, 'feminist interventions' into German cinema – to borrow a phrase from the subtitle of this two-volume collection – have often attracted considerable admiration. Histories of women's filmmaking in 1970s and 1980s West Germany regularly note the special vibrancy of feminist film culture in a period which saw the emergence of 'proportionally more women filmmakers than in any other national cinema': figures like Helke Sander, Jutta Brückner, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Margarethe von Trotta and others, whose work from the mid 1970s onwards gained international critical acclaim.¹ That same period saw the emergence of a body of German feminist film criticism which made a distinctive and significant contribution to Euro-American debates in the field. It was first and foremost through a handful of committed cultural journals that dialogue on issues of gender and cinema was promoted across the German-Anglophone divide; hence for instance the articles by Miriam Hansen and Ramona Curry in this collection on the (formerly West) German journal *frauen und film*, which, in particular since its early 1980s editorial reorientation away from feminist film praxis and towards more theoretical concerns, has worked to provide a forum for cross-cultural debate on issues pertinent to feminism and film. Similar aims have been pursued by like-minded North American titles: *New German*

¹ Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: a History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 185.

Critique, for instance, or *October*, *Jump Cut* and *Discourse*, all of which have engaged to a greater or lesser extent with German critical traditions.

A sample of the results of that transcultural exchange is presented in this two-volume collection. *Gender and German Cinema* draws together an impressive range of articles, extended reviews and interviews, most originally published in English, the majority apparently in journals of German studies or film (though the latter point is hard to establish, since the collection irritatingly omits many original source references). The pieces are chosen primarily, of course, for their shared concern with questions of feminism and gender; indeed they illustrate the rich diversity of German-oriented material in this field. As the editors note (vol. I, p. xiii), there is an emergent body of feminist criticism that challenges received wisdom in the German film studies field: witness, for example, Patrice Petro's rewriting of the Weimar film canon from the perspective of the female spectator, or Julia Knight's insistence in her book *Women and the New German Cinema* on the centrality of women's work to this most celebrated period in recent (West) German film history.² By pulling together a broad array of hitherto dispersed critical material, *Gender and German Cinema* makes a further contribution to the feminist project of a rewriting of the canons and established truths of German film history, and there are indeed some rare jewels here. Sabine Hake's piece on the early films of Ernst Lubitsch, 'Wayward women of the early silent cinema', for instance, is an exemplary demonstration of the way in which a feminist analysis of certain films' potential to 'transgress . . . sexual identities' (vol. II, p. 28), or to promote active modes of female spectatorship, may create a platform for broader challenges to film theory and historiography: thus for Hake, Lubitsch's *The Doll* (1919) becomes a 'forgotten masterpiece', the 'feminine side' of a cinema of the fantastic conventionally seen as epitomized only by what she terms expressionism's 'male universe of horror and madness' (vol. II, p. 25). Writing in similar vein, though of a more contemporary moment, B. Ruby Rich in 'She says, he says: the power of the narrator in modernist film politics' uses a comparison between different modes of cinematic modernism in films by Alexander Kluge and Helke Sander to argue with equal persuasiveness for a rewriting of the canons of modernism in the light of what can be identified from a feminist perspective as the authoritarian narrative strategies of Brechtian cinema à la Kluge. Miriam Hansen's account of visual pleasure in Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return* (1979), meanwhile, offers a sure-footed demonstration of the way in which terms borrowed from German critical tradition may disrupt the certainties of film theory in an Anglo-American frame. Thus by situating *Ticket of No Return* in the context of 1970s West German feminist film culture as an 'oppositional public sphere' (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*) (vol. I, p. 192), Hansen is able not only to show

2 Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Julia Knight, *Women and the New German Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 1992).

how the film itself 'extricated [visual pleasure] from the voyeuristic context of traditional narrative', but also to demonstrate how a historicizing of the viewing context might enrich or render more complex the psychoanalytically inflected theories that have until recently dominated Anglo-American feminist accounts of visual pleasure and female spectatorship.

The contributions by Hansen, Hake and Rich are significant, not simply for their particular lucidity and critical illumination, but also as exemplars of the special strengths of the whole of this collection. Hansen's defence of Ottinger, or Rich's of Helke Sander, are echoed in the large number of other pieces collected here which aim to resituate women filmmakers at the centre of film-critical debate. It is refreshing to see so much space devoted not only to the star personae of recent German feminist filmmaking (Sander, Sanders-Brahms, Brückner, von Trotta), but to directors less well known outside Germany whose work has, however, been of special national significance: Ula Stöckl for instance, the Austrian Valie Export, or Marianne Rosenbaum, Lothar Lambert, Heidi Genée. Equally welcome is the (admittedly rather less extended) attention given to feminist re-readings of canonical works: Käthe Geist on Wim Wenders's problematic depiction of women and children, for instance, or, in one of only two pieces on Nazi cinema in the two volumes, Régine Mihal Friedman's trenchant psychoanalytic exploration of the sexual politics of anti-Semitism in Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* (1940).

Foregrounded in the articles by Hake and Hansen discussed above is a further question that recurs throughout the collection: the question, that is, of female spectatorship, and especially of the adequacy of Hollywood-inspired models of gendered spectatorship to European national cinemas. To take one instance of a body of work around which that debate crystallizes: the collection includes a number of discussions of Margarethe von Trotta, whose work is variously dismissed as having capitulated to Hollywood narrative convention (Barton Byg on *The German Sisters* [1981]), presented as a positive model for new cinematic structures of feminine identification (Anna Kuhn on *Rosa Luxemburg* [1986]), or defended as the catalyst for a historically specific and highly politicized mode of popular audience reception (Renate Möhrmann on von Trotta's first film on female terrorism, *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* [1978]). The inclusion of these very different analyses of textual politics in von Trotta – analyses which move from the strictly formalist (Byg) to the sociohistorical (Möhrmann) – not only usefully illustrates the key issues at stake in any discussion of her films, it also opens up a debate that must be considered central in any survey of these two volumes: a debate that centres on questions of cross-cultural reception.

The pieces by Möhrmann and Byg illustrate the two poles of that discussion, the former as an 'insider's view' of von Trotta's work by a prominent German feminist critic, the latter a resounding

condemnation of von Trotta from a US perspective. Renate Möhrmann uses an analysis of *Christa Klages*' reception amongst a variety of audiences – the political Left, feminists, popular audiences – to argue for the virtues of von Trotta's particular brand of 'popular cinema' (*Christa Klages* enjoyed huge success, both amongst critics and at the box office), and to suggest that in 'the segmented, overly specialized "culture hierarchy" of West Germany . . . where the category "entertainment" suffers such a poor reputation, this constitutes no small victory' (vol. I, p. 83). Barton Byg, by contrast, draws on 'the feminist critique of the Oedipal narrative in film, as expressed by Laura Mulvey and others' (vol. II, p. 260) to argue that it is precisely von Trotta's use of popular cinematic convention that renders *The German Sisters* 'reactionary'. In his view, 'in mass culture, conventions such as the Oedipal narrative and genre imperatives used in von Trotta's film, are *inherently incapable* of radical expression' (p. 264, emphasis mine). Like many authors in this collection, Byg strains throughout his discussion of von Trotta to force a fit between her film, and his own (highly reductive) version of Anglo-American film theory. The consequent deficiencies in his argument – there is too much hollow polemic on von Trotta's 'reactionary' cinema, too haughty a disregard for women spectators who, apparently despite themselves, 'do derive pleasure from von Trotta's conventional drama' (p. 264) – are not specific to Byg, but are rather symptomatic of a more general weakness in the collection.

Most of the pieces reproduced here are North American in origin; and Byg's work is but one amongst many examples of the way the collection replicates many of the blindspots and occlusions of the recent US reception of German cinema: a reception that has been at best highly selective, at worst profoundly Anglocentric in its imposition of Anglo-American critical orthodoxies on German material. Until the advent of the New German Cinema from the early 1970s, Anglo-American critical interest in German film was largely confined to a small handful of expressionist classics. That picture changed dramatically with the arrival on the international scene of such figures as Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders, whose work was seen to signal the dawning of a new era of politically and aesthetically engaged (West) German cinema. British and North American critics were quick to applaud what they often wrongly represented as a coherent and integrated cinematic movement, and to set about celebrating its achievements with a spate of laudatory histories of key auteurs.³ That the New German Cinema has, as a result of that extensive critical attention, become the pivot around which Anglo-American studies of German cinema now circulates, is amply demonstrated by *Gender and German Cinema*. Of the four parts which make up the two volumes, three are devoted to the New German Cinema, subdivided under the headings of 'Narrative cinema', 'Experimental and underground cinema', and 'Historical films', with

3 See, for example, John Sandford, *The New German Cinema* (New York: Da Capo, 1980); James Franklin, *New German Cinema: From Oberhausen to Hamburg* (Boston: Twayne, 1983); Timothy Corrigan, *New German Film: the Displaced Image* (Austin: University of Texas, 1983); Klaus Phillips (ed.), *New West German Filmmakers: From Oberhausen Through the 1970s* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984).

an appendix on history and feminist criticism. The subordinate status within critical hierarchies of other moments in German cinema history is clearly signalled by the title of volume II, part I, which assembles a patchwork of contributions on diverse earlier film movements and moments, from the early silents to the 1950s, under the catch-all heading 'Film history before New German Cinema'.

The privileging of New German Cinema (henceforth NGC) is problematic on a number of counts. In the first instance, it seems a curious editorial choice in a context in which the category itself has been used historically to marginalize the very women filmmakers whom this collection purports to defend. As Miriam Hansen reminds us, 'while 'New German Cinema' has . . . become a brand name for the work of Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders and Schlöndorff, this lucrative label is rarely conferred upon films by Ula Stöckl, Helke Sander, Jutta Brückner or Ottinger'. Indeed, 'the more consciously feminist women filmmakers did not see their goal as the addition of a few women directors to the pantheon of New German *auteurs*' (vol. I, p. 191). In *Gender and German Cinema* it is, however, precisely those filmmakers whose project was to create a film culture outside and beyond the exclusive confines of the NGC who are excluded from view: women like Doris Dörrie, for instance, who has consistently eschewed the NGC's address to an international arthouse circuit, and has instead successfully targeted popular audiences at home; or documentary filmmakers like Helga Reidemeister or Cristina Perincioli, whose work was crucial to the early development of feminist film culture in West Germany.

The editors might respond that Anglophone critical work on such figures is simply non-existent; yet a more proactive editorial stance in relation to commissioning and translations in particular would have overcome these difficulties. On translations: only a handful of the pieces reproduced here appeared originally in German, and the criteria whereby even these have been selected for translation remain obscure. Why for instance the inclusion of *reviews* of single films, but the omission of such historically pivotal contributions to German feminist film *theory* as Helke Sander's polemic on sexism in the mass media in the first issue of *frauen und film*, Gertrud Koch's attempted marrying of Frankfurt School theory with Anglo-American feminist writing on female spectatorship, or Heide Schlüppmann's studies of the female audience and early silent cinema?⁴ Had the editors ranged more widely across the rich field of German feminist film criticism, they would not only have found themselves more adequately representing the very lively dialogue that German critics have been conducting with Anglophone feminism; they would also have broken open the canon that positions the NGC and Weimar as the only legitimate objects of German film criticism. Where, in *Gender and German Cinema*, is there any inkling of the heated debates within German feminism on pornography in cinema? Where – apart from in Gisela Bahr's

4 See Helke Sander, 'Sexismus in den Massenmedien', *frauen und film*, no. 1 (1974); Gertrud Koch, 'Exchanging the gaze: revisioning feminist film theory', *New German Critique*, no. 34 (Winter 1985); Heide Schlüppmann, 'Kinosucht', *frauen und film*, no. 33 (1982), pp. 45–51 and *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks. Das Drama des frühen deutschen Kinos* (Stroemfeld/Floter Stern: Basel and Frankfurt am Main, 1990).

necessarily brief survey in volume I – is there any account of gender and feminism in the film culture of the former GDR? Where are the contributions on fascism and cinema that might have augmented Regine Mihal Friedman's and Anke Gleber's excellent, but here rather isolated accounts? Where are the critiques of sexism in popular cinema, the revisitings of Weimar film theory, the engagement with masculinity that have been as much a part of German feminist film criticism as have its critiques of male NGC auteurs?

On the one hand, what this collection gives us is an invaluable resource to add to the expanding field of Anglophone feminist criticism of German cinema. The comprehensive bibliography and film-historical chronology which accompany the collected articles make these two volumes quite indispensable to teachers and researchers in the field. (Details of US distributors are given too, though there is nothing on what remains, despite the worthy efforts of the Goethe-Institut and Glenbuck Films, a lamentably inadequate situation regarding German film distribution in the UK.) It is, moreover, not only as a coursebook that *Gender and German Cinema* is significant. As the most comprehensive available document in English of recent feminist work on German film criticism and history, it will give important impetus not only to feminism within German film studies, but also to feminist dialogues across the Anglophone–German cultural divide. German feminist criticism is perhaps most clearly distinguished from its Anglo–American counterparts by its insistence on the ethical imperative of an engagement with history and the national past; hence the devotion of one of these two volumes to questions of history, and the editors' insistence that 'The history of German filmmaking . . . cannot easily (or responsibly) be separated from Germany's political history during this century, especially from Germany's experience of National Socialism and World War II' (vol. II, p. 1). It is to be hoped that, just as German writers have turned to Anglophone film theory for critical approaches more sensitive to film as a popular art than is, say, post-Frankfurt School mass culture theory, so too Anglophone critics might use their reading of this collection as an occasion to reflect on the importance of the kind of embedding of feminist criticism in political history that characterizes much German work in the field.

So much for the fruitful insights that can be gleaned from this collection. Where *Gender and German Cinema* fails, on the other hand, is in its reluctance to transgress the boundaries of established canons in Anglophone German film criticism. It is no accident that the strongest contributions are those whose objects of study lie outside mainstream film scholarship: in experimental and underground cinema (Jeffrey Peck on Lothar Lambert, Ramona Curry and others on Valie Export, Miriam Hansen on Ulrike Ottinger), or in lost traditions of popular cinema (Sabine Hake on the early silents, Heide Fehrenbach on the early 1950s). These are film cultures which have been at best

peripheral to canonical concerns; yet it is arguably this very marginalization that makes them the source of the most innovative critical work. Critics working from the margins of their discipline are forced, precisely by the exclusion of their objects of study from mainstream paradigms, to construct new historiographical and methodological frameworks that often productively shatter orthodox categories. Surely, for instance, Miriam Hansen's work on the public sphere in her critique of Ottinger offers a route to a more fully historicized and comprehensive understanding of gender at all levels of film culture than does the rather sterile and masculinist category of the NGC? Perhaps, indeed, the term 'New German Cinema' in the end obscures far more than it illuminates of issues of gender in German cinema. Certainly the obsessive focus on the NGC leads to much being glossed over in this collection: witness the brevity of contributions on gender in GDR cinema or popular film, or on gender issues in their relation to masculinity, homosexuality, race and anti-Semitism. Thus finally, if a first step towards a feminist understanding of German cinema has been made by these volumes, then perhaps the next step is a radical dismantling of the category 'New German Cinema' as a central axis of Anglophone German film studies, in an effort to broaden and render more complex our understanding of cinematic constructions of gender in a German frame.

With thanks to Jill Morris for helpful discussions on the North American reception of New German Cinema.

review:

Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 257pp.

WILL STRAW

There is significance in the fact that Andrew Goodwin's book, published in 1992, is the last important English language treatment of music video. While popular music studies are now the focus of a publishing boom, there seems little interest within the academic or critical field in writing about the videoclip, at least in its North American or British manifestations. Partly, of course, this is because the music video has become familiar and banal, no longer – in an age of court television and reality crime shows – the televisual form which calls out most desperately (or seductively) for diagnosis. At the same time, claims that the videoclip has profoundly reshaped the values of popular music (that it has, for example, intensified the need for distinctive, telegenic celebrity figures) resonate weakly in an age of transnational dance undergrounds and scruffy, alternative rock. Finally, we must acknowledge that the music video fell in too early with bad theoretical company, that it has been tainted as an object of analysis by its fleeting but intense association with accounts of postmodernity.

The Summer 1995 issue of *Post*, a bilingual, Montreal-based magazine of cultural studies, is a special number devoted to music video (or 'le vidéoclip'). I bought and read it as I was buckling down to write this review, scrounging around for clues as to what one might say about music video in 1995. Despite the insight and ingenuity of most of the pieces contained therein, I was puzzled by the methodological fervour which fuelled so many of the analyses of

individual clips, locating them within histories of perspectival figuration or intertextual collage. The very project of bringing poststructuralist analysis to bear upon music video has seemed so discredited for so long that its enthusiastic deployment here seemed almost endearingly audacious.

Tracking the bibliographical references which recur throughout the articles in *Post*, one sees quite clearly the historical movement of academic writing on music video since the early 1980s. An initial inclination towards negative treatments gains momentum with the ascendancy of postmodernist theorizing within cultural studies, culminating in the special issue of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (vol. 10, no. 1 [1986]). Here, television has become the most perfectly emblematic cultural form of postmodernity, and the videoclip the inevitable endpoint of television's own developmental logics. What is surprising, with a decade's distance, is how much the rhetorical scale of oppositional cultural analysis in the mid 1980s mirrors that of High Reaganism itself as a political-cultural moment. Critical writing on music video, like, say, the anti-imperialist videoclip for Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'Two Tribes', has a grandeur and drama which make both seem relics of a much more self-important age.

Against the backdrop of this rhetorical inflation, it is not surprising that a subsequent wave of writing on music video will be marked by a greater caution, and by scepticism towards the claim that music video signals radical mutations of subjective experience. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* sets out to rescue music video from the more ludicrous and untenable of such accounts. It does so with great care and caution, and one reason for the silence about music video which has followed it (a few Madonna anthologies aside) may be its success in discouraging attempts to find, in the music video form, evidence of an epochal transformation of cultural values. Goodwin achieves this, in the manner of others who have undertaken similar rescue missions, by restoring the analysis of music video to the study of popular music. Popular music, Goodwin notes (echoing Frith), has long been intimately bound up with imagery and the visual figuring of artistic persona. Music video, then, is neither the corruption of a pure and abstract cultural form (music) by another which constrains and literalizes it, nor emblematic of a moment in which the last oppositional cultural practice is fully integrated within the mechanisms of celebrity. On the contrary, as the cultural form which has most persistently centred on the human figure and textual embodiments of solitary subjectivity, popular music typically has been built on imagery and the signifiers of identity. Music video is one historically specific mutation of this. (One of the peculiar features of this whole debate is the way in which popular music – for so long romanticized as the site of rupture and revolution – has come to stand as the terrain of historical and cultural continuity.)

Having made these claims, Goodwin may then suggest that we look

not simply at what television has done to music, but at what music video has done to television. It has clearly made television more fun, more 'musical' (p. xvi), but it has similarly led MTV (and other music video programmes) into a relationship with certain political impulses which is not reducible to the latter's commodification or cooptation:

Because MTV is a dedicated service, committed to the promotion of an 'alternative' culture (however cynically or self-servingly), it has an investment in risk taking that public service and commercial networks alike do not share. One result of this is that MTV has (in selected instances) opened up the political agenda on television, by using gatekeeping criteria that reflect the values of rock and roll rather than the values of a paternalistic broadcasting institution (p. 178).

This is an unappealing claim to those compelled to locate the political effectivity of music video in some distinctly new articulation of music and image which it has served to produce. The misguided impulse of my own (and other early) writing on music video, perhaps, was to insist too strongly that its politics had to do principally with the cultural status of imagery. I embraced music video's early association with British New Pop for revealing the 'truth' that identities were semiotic constructions; others condemned this association as a capitulation to the logics of commodification and a celebrity culture. Finally, however, Goodwin's point is both modest and convincing. There is a rock politics, however messy, frequently unappealing and even modernist that politics might be, and its persistence in an age of music video stems partially from the fact that it is not exclusively or even primarily about the status of image in relation to music. As such it continues, in a variety of partial and often inarticulate ways, to inflect the various discourses which criss-cross the programming of MTV, MuchMusic and other music video programming services.

It is worth speculating how much the initial academic response to music video was shaped by what were, at least on one level, a series of coincidences: the emergence of MTV following a decade in which rock music had virtually vanished from North American television (such that MTV's departure from the entrenched values of rock music culture seemed all the more striking); the simultaneity of that emergence with the trickling down of notions of postmodernity from high art into cultural studies contexts; the way in which the dispersal of punk into a series of revivals, each marked by the resurrection of historical styles, coincided with the rise of the videoclip, such that the latter seemed to be defined by pastiche and the recycling of historical styles. We might wonder, as well, how much the care and caution Goodwin exhibits in his valuable study has been nourished by the settling of music video into its current status (when set alongside the Web, for example) as one of the more familiar and unremarkable of cultural forms.